ELECTRONIC

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TANGERINE DREAM

PHAEDRA AT 50

KARL BARTOS / YARD ACT / MAYA SHENFELD / DREW MULHOLLAND / MARTHA AND THE MUFFINS / OM UNIT

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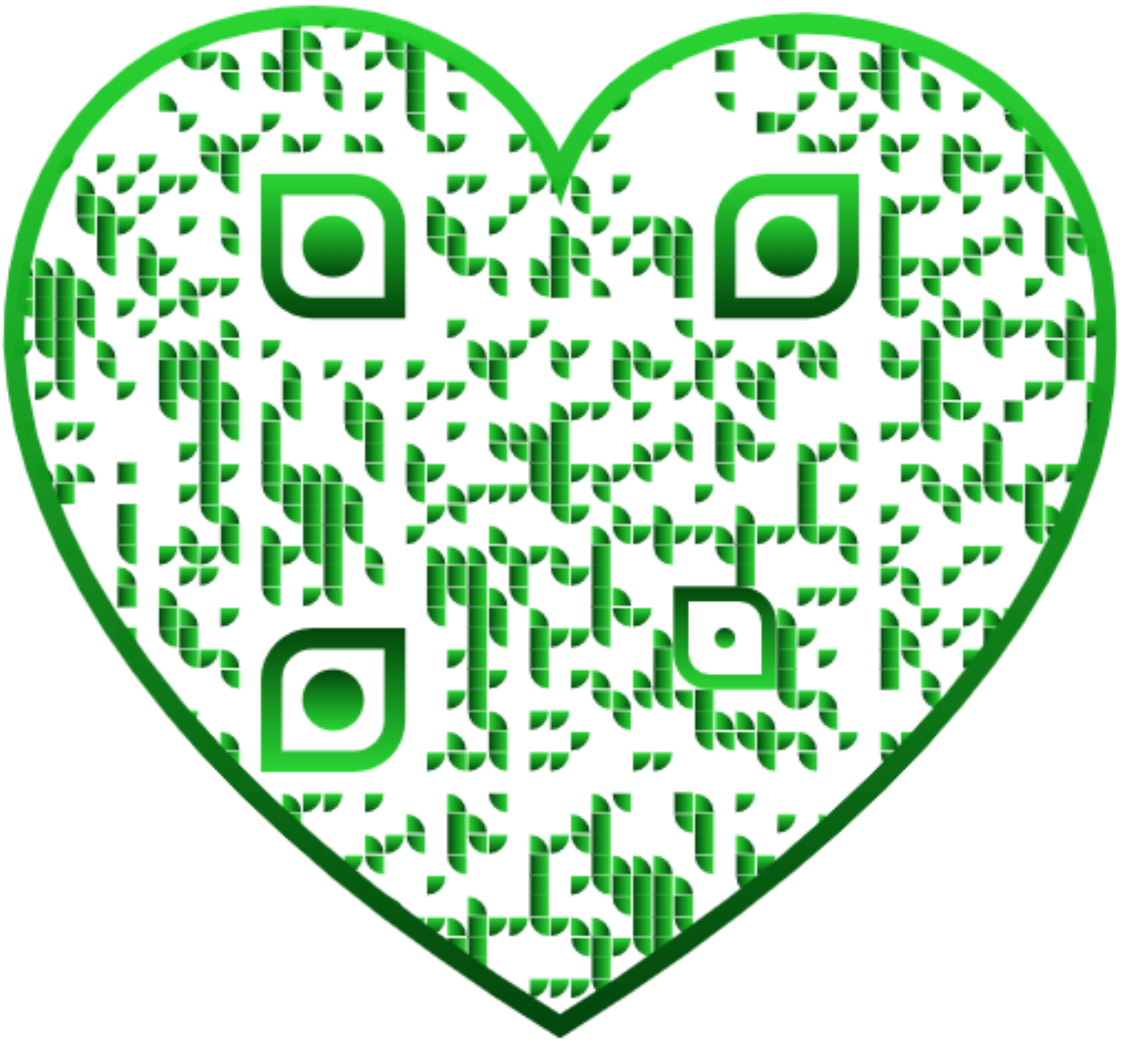

110

WELCOME TO ELECTRONIC SOUND

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Push

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Mark Hall

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Velimir Ilic

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Gill Mullins
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We're wheeling back to February 1974 – precisely 50 years ago – for this month's cover feature, which tells the story of Tangerine Dream's groundbreaking 'Phaedra' album. The Berlin band's debut for Richard Branson's still-shiny Virgin label, it was greeted with a mixture of curiosity, excitement, amusement and confusion. Electronic sound wasn't exactly new by this point, but the sequencer-fuelled 'Phaedra' was electronic sound as it had never been heard before.

There was a fair amount of contempt for the album too, much of it in the pages of the British weekly music papers. Melody Maker writer Steve Lake dismissed it as "gutless and spineless" and "devoid of inspiration", calling the group "German knob-turners" and describing Edgar Froese as "a failed guitarist". Towards the end of 1974, however, when NME published an interview with Tangerine Dream by Max Bell under the title "Is This The End Of Rock As We Know It?", the answer wasn't quite as clear-cut as some journalists might have liked.

Against the odds perhaps, 'Phaedra' proved to be a massive commercial success and earned gold discs in seven countries, although for some reason it was a king-sized flop in Germany. It was particularly popular in the UK, with sales figures hitting six figures within a few months. Not that Steve Lake was in any way impressed by that. He subsequently wrote another scathing piece about the group for Melody Maker which opened with the words, "Eat more shit – 100,000 flies can't be wrong". Ouch.

The album is considered a 24-carat classic now, of course. It set Tangerine Dream on the path to superstardom, with the band remaining on Virgin for the next decade or so and releasing a string of brilliant records that included 'Rubycon' (1975) and 'Force Majeure' (1979), as well as lesser known but still enthralling works such as 'White Eagle' (1982). And as the years rolled past and Edgar Froese parted company with his 'Phaedra' partners Peter Baumann and Christopher Franke, he became the sole mainstay of the ever-shifting line-up, continuing to lead the group until his death in 2015 at the age of 70.

As you probably know, Froese's unexpected and untimely passing has not put a stop to Tangerine Dream. So as well as looking back half a century, we also have an interview with the current incarnation of the band – Thorsten Quaeschning, Hoshiko Yamane and Paul Frick. As releases like 'Quantum Gate' and 'Raum' show, the trio are more than capable of upholding the extremely high standards of the legacy they've inherited.

Still on the subject of German electronic music legends, Karl Bartos is among our other interviews this issue, talking about his soundtrack to a 100-year-old expressionist film. We have features on Yard Act, Maya Shenfeld, Drew Mulholland, Tristan Perich and Office For Personal Development too. If you've not come across OPD before, they're a synthpop outfit masquerading as a sinister corporate cult. Or maybe it's the other way round…

Electronically yours,
Push and Mark

EDITORIAL
editorial@electronicsound.co.uk

ADVERTISING
Chris Dawes
chris@electronicsound.co.uk

SUBSCRIPTIONS
electronicsound.co.uk/subscribe
support@electronicsound.co.uk

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electronicsound.co.uk
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CONTRIBUTORS
Jeremy Allen, Joe Banks, Imogen Bebb, Ian Berriman, Scott Blixen, Claire Carroll, Paul Clarke, Joe Clay, Bethan Cole, Stephen Dalton, Bob Fischer, Ben Gilbert, Ian Gittins, Carl Griffin, Robert Harris, Jo Hutton, Martin James, Jo Kendall, Andy Linehan, Neil Mason, Finlay Milligan, Ben Murphy, Kris Needs, Sharon O'Connell, Matt Parker, David Pollock, Chris Roberts, Fat Roland, Will Salmon, Joe Silva, Dave Simpson, Will Simpson, Mat Smith, Anton Spice, William Stokes, David Stubbs, James Thornhill, Anthony Thornton, Neil Thomson, Spenser Tomson, Oli Warwick, Ben Willmott, Jonathan Wright

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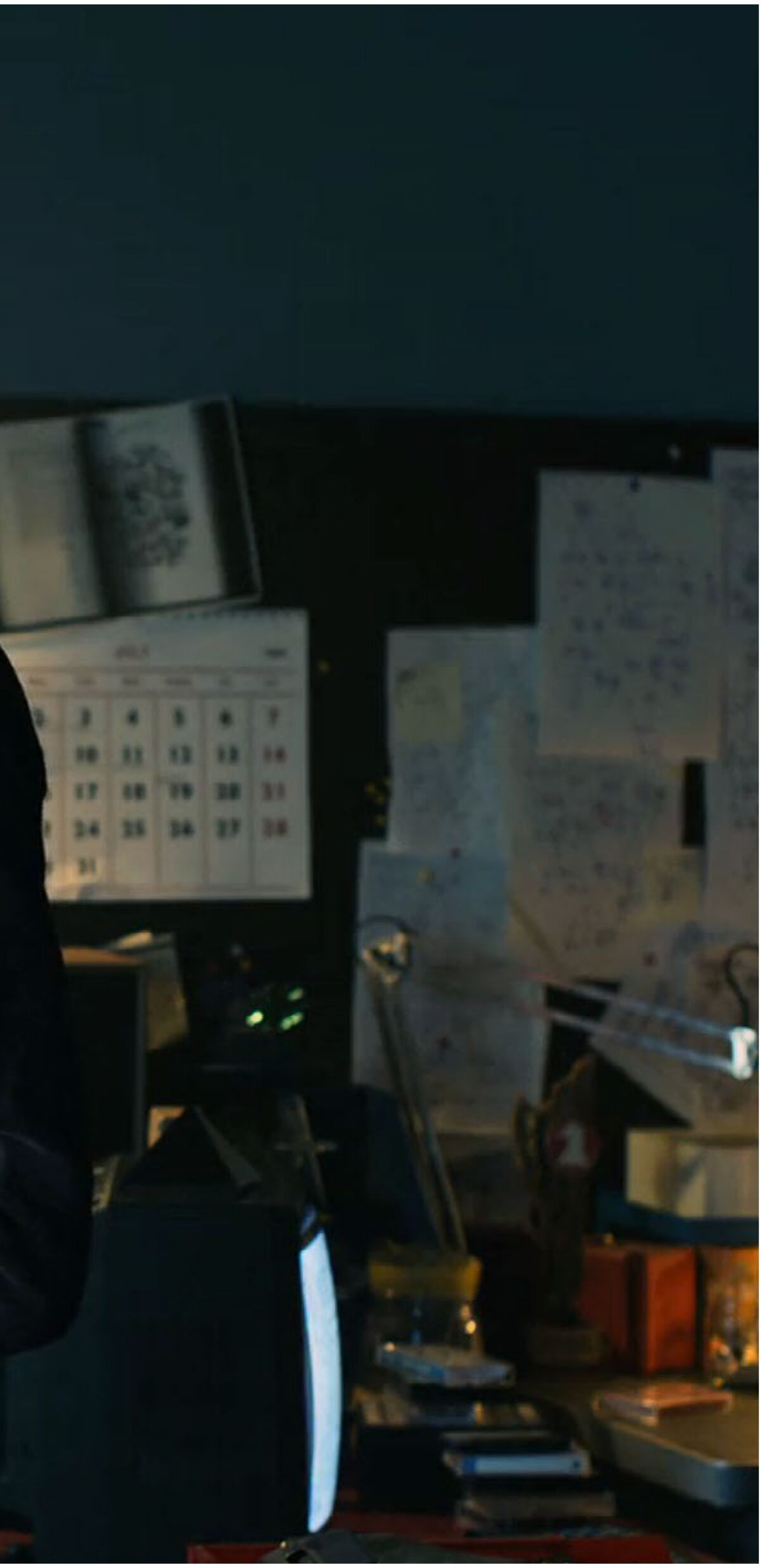
phaedra



‘BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH’

Charlie Brooker

2018

INTERVIEW: ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH

“The idea was to provide the viewer or player with increasingly tricky choices as the story developed,” says Charlie Brooker of the interactive film ‘Black Mirror: Bandersnatch’. “Early on, Stefan, played by Fionn Whitehead, is on the bus choosing to play either a Thompson Twins track or a Eurythmics track on his Walkman. Later, Stefan meets legendary coder Colin Ritman, played by Will Poulter. Colin is an idol of Stefan’s and a sort of ‘mystic guru’ who’s aware that he exists within a game. At first, Colin’s character was conceived as something of a hippy, but he ended up more eclectic and interesting than that, and styled in a kind of post-punk way. He gives Stefan a list of album recommendations for good music to write games to and ‘Phaedra’ by Tangerine Dream is on there.

“Originally, it was a toss up between that and ‘Rubycon’. I love both for their spookiness, and though I prefer the cover art for ‘Rubycon’, ‘Phaedra’ was a better fit for the soundtrack. The player then decides which album Stefan buys from Colin’s list in WHSmith. Alongside ‘Phaedra’, I wanted the other one to be ‘Radio-Activity’ by Kraftwerk. I heard both of these albums a lot during my childhood, as my dad had pretty eclectic tastes when he was younger – Kraftwerk, Tangerine Dream, the Sex Pistols, AC/DC and Ivor Cutler. When I was about seven or eight, I would listen to them through a pair of chunky headphones.

“I didn’t realise at the time what an odd collection of albums this was. Like any child of the 70s and 80s, I grew up with the BBC Radiophonic Workshop accompanying roughly 50 per cent of the TV shows I was exposed to, so electronic sounds had been part of the background for as long as I could remember. Even so, I found the Tangerine Dream and Kraftwerk albums simultaneously compelling, and a little bit scary. They were so unlike the rock and pop I heard on the radio.

“Unfortunately, we couldn’t clear ‘Radio-Activity’ for the film, so Isao Tomita’s ‘The Bermuda Triangle’ was a last-minute substitution. The chosen album then plays during the following montage. In retrospect, I wish we’d opted for a very different choice to Tomita – maybe ‘Who’s Afraid Of The Art Of Noise’ would’ve been more distinct, and we’d have edited the resulting montages differently rather than identically!

“I often specify music choices in the scripts for ‘Black Mirror’ – a real no-no if I wasn’t also one of the executive producers. I always love finding a track that’s evocative and comments on the action in some way. I’m also a fan of incredibly on-the-nose choices, especially ones that make me laugh. In the recent ‘Black Mirror’ episode ‘Demon 79’, the main character Nida is looking around a pub choosing a victim to murder – with a hammer – and ‘Hit Me With Your Rhythm Stick’ comes on the jukebox. I’ve always enjoyed an ironic counterpoint to the action, ever since my series ‘Dead Set’, where we had a zombie massacre take place to the sound of ‘Grace Kelly’ by Mika.”

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Tangerine Dream
‘Phaedra (Edited Version)’ /
‘Mysterious Semblance At The Strand Of Nightmares (Edited Version)’
Tangerine vinyl seven-inch

Our latest release is an exclusive seven-inch featuring two edited tracks from ‘Phaedra’, Tangerine Dream’s immersive masterpiece

This month’s Electronic Sound seven-inch showcases Tangerine Dream at their peak, with edits of two key cuts from ‘Phaedra’, the revered German group’s pioneering 1974 album. Encompassing electronics, dark ambience and touches of prog, ‘Phaedra’ is a work of analogue beauty, crafted using the cutting-edge technology of the day – Moog, Mellotron and VCS 3 – and with one eye fixed on the future.

The album marked Tangerine Dream’s debut for Richard Branson’s fast-emerging Virgin label. The three band members – Edgar Froese, Peter Baumann and Christopher Franke – travelled to the UK for the recording sessions, which took place towards the end of 1973 at The Manor, a magnificent Tudor house in the Oxfordshire countryside that Branson had converted into a studio. The otherworldly soundscapes the trio created, often after partaking of a little herbal refreshment, were wholly unique, due in large part to the sequencers that dominate much of the record.

“Today, you can hear the sound of sequencers everywhere,” says Peter Baumann. “But at the time, it was absolutely new, no one even knew what it was, and you can’t recreate the exact sounds anymore because you don’t have the specific characters of the instruments. Sometimes we recorded and improvised over the top – we had our fair share of joints, and if not joints then pot brownies – and you end up swimming in those soundscapes. That’s how we put it together.”

The band initially struggled with both their alien surroundings and their machines. They had used a sizeable chunk of their advance from Virgin to buy a Moog, but they found it extremely difficult to control the instrument. Their Mellotron proved to be tricksy too. After several days in the studio, the breakthrough finally came with what would become the 17-minute title track of ‘Phaedra’. As Christopher Franke tried to re-tune the Moog, he chanced upon a captivating sequencer loop, which Edgar Froese seized upon as soon as he heard it. And so the foundation stone of the album was set.

The A-side of our seven-inch is an edit of ‘Phaedra’ and the flip is an edit of ‘Mysterious Semblance At The Strand Of Nightmares’, another epic piece on the album. This is not the first time that abridged versions of the two tracks have appeared back-to-back on a seven-inch. When Virgin released ‘Phaedra’ in America, they issued edits of these same tracks on a promotional single for a limited number of journalists, radio DJs and shop owners. With an unusual light blue centre label bearing Roger Dean’s famous Virgin “Twins” logo, the promo has been one of Tangerine Dream’s rarest records for many decades.

They might not have realised it back then, but Froese, Baumann and Franke sent electronic music into another dimension with ‘Phaedra’. As the band’s studio time at The Manor started running out, Froese came up with ‘Mysterious Semblance At The Strand Of Nightmares’ with his then-partner Monika, using a box capable of producing phaser and flanger effects – which was pretty much unheard of in 1973 – to scale fresh heights of recorded sound. Steeped in Mellotron hues and redolent of early Pink Floyd, it’s a hypnotic and exhilarating interstellar trip. Half a century on, it remains a defining moment in the seemingly never-ending story of Tangerine Dream. Not bad for a track that Froese described as “a musical quickie”.

THE FRONT

3 Welcome

4 Opening Shot

6 Reader Offer

11 Ginamaya

12 Needs Must

14 Martha And The Muffins

16 Banging On

19 Chanel Beads

20 Neil Kulkarni

21 The Naked Flame

22 School Of Electronic Music

24 Om Unit

29 Dermabrasion

30 ‘Under The Island: Experimental Music In Ireland 1960-1994’

33 Louis Giannamore

FEATURES

34 Tangerine Dream

50 Karl Bartos

56 Yard Act

62 Maya Shenfeld

66 Drew Mulholland

70 Office For Personal Development

72 Tristan Perich

THE BACK

76 Lost Souls Of Saturn

78 Ëda Diaz, NUNU, Mike Cooper & Pierre Bastien, Brion Gysin

79 Made By John, Aron & The Jeri Jeri Band, ‘Family Album 2024’, David Wallraf

80 Jess Brett, Alto Aria, Crisp Wolves, Ashtrejinkins

81 Alvidrez, Annie Aries, Infesta, Breeze

82 Laryssa Kim, Letters From Mouse, Polygonia, Lamin Fofana

83 Sad Man, Alessandro Alessandroni, Pregoblin, Nailah Hunter

84 ‘The Stills Series’, Lust Pattern, Elif Yalvaç, Kenn Hartwig

85 Julia Govor, Austra, Amiture, Helado Negro

86 Fer Franco, Laetitia Sadier, The Body And Dis Fig

87 Kali Malone, Office For Personal Development, Scanner

88 Rural Tapes, Rafael Toral, Basil Kirchin

89 Lou Reed, Karen Vogt

90 Love And Rockets, Kim Gordon

91 Aurora Engine, Rafael Anton Irisarri, David Best

92 Slowfoam, Boofy & VMO$, Maya Shenfeld

93 Epic45, Wayside & Woodland Recordings Ltd

94 Maria W Horn

95 Dualist Inquiry, ‘Feeling Everything, All At Once’, Karen Vogt

96 Tapir!, Arto Lindsay, Sedibus

97 Xmal Deutschland / Anja Huwe, Karl Bartos

98 Alvidrez

HUNGER GAMES

Package to get you started in music

"Self-expression through sound design" is the maxim of West Coast company Chompi Club, whose self-described mission is to help people interact with sound design as a language. Their flagship product is the Chompi, a smart yet playful chromatic sampler and tape music instrument that smashed its Kickstarter target without breaking a sweat. It's not hard to see why, either, with its large, colourful interface and customisable knobs promising a fun-loving visual experience that will please eyes and ears alike. Not too shabby for £569.
chompiclub.com

PULSE

GINAMAYA

Chi-town popstress serves up soul food

WHO?

The sounds of Chicago-based artist Ginamaya are self-produced and thoroughly DIY, but they could still give the most innovative and resource-heavy musicians a serious run for their money. Arriving last month, 'Miss Moon', her new four-track EP, has a sense of naive wonder to it, as she explores soul and electropop reference points with childlike whimsy, while describing her journey from "maiden to motherhood".

WHY GINAMAYA?

"I see myself as a collage artist of sound," says Ginamaya when describing 'Miss Moon's sonic vignettes which are formed by layers of vocals, samples and diverse musical cues. Previous EPs 'Cloud Shoes' and 'Body West' had a darker hue to them, but 'Miss Moon' steps into the light as a "spiritual and intellectual exercise against nihilism". The music is optimistic and complex. Confident and fearlessly inventive. Take the title track, which opens with dense vocal harmonies that subside into seconds of post-industrial drone, giving way to warped tribal rhythms akin to 'Blue Lines'-era Massive Attack (a motif ramped up on 'Heavenly Mother'). The EP sits decidedly in between the accessible and the experimental. "I can't help what I make when it comes down to it," she says. "It keeps happening, and I want to keep allowing it to come through."

TELL US MORE...

'Miss Moon' was produced as Ginamaya watched her one-year-old daughter Ayla grow. This momentous occasion fed into the music's key themes of partnership, ancestral worship and motherhood. Several of the unorthodox samples portray the emotions of childhood and parenthood, like a phone recording of her babbling baby opening the track 'Ayla', or the sample of a child's wind-up toy playing 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' on 'Uncrustables Rich'. All in all, Ginamaya has turned the bubble of her existence into a vast yet relatable aural world – as all the best pop music should.

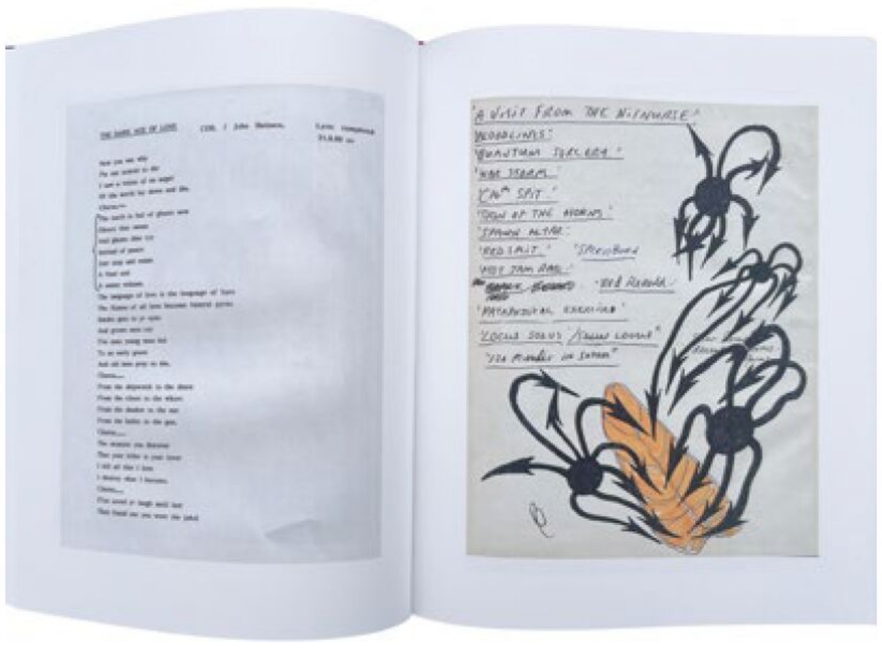
JAMES THORNHILL

'Miss Moon' is out now via Bandcamp

BALANCING THE SCALES

Coil man's diaries published in full

'The Cupboard Under The Stars' is a coffee table-worthy tome compiling the notebooks of Coil founder John Balance. While it might make for rather fruity bedtime reading, in part due to the frequent explicit content inside, the book serves as a genuinely illuminating glimpse into the mind of an avant-garde genius. It's compiled and sequenced by Balance fan-turned-friend Claus Laufenburg, and features a selection of hand-written, unedited lyrics, drawings, essays, research and "rants", as well as concepts for videos, magazines and projects which were never completed before Balance's untimely death in 2004. At £41, this really is a must-buy. Chop chop. **timeless-shop.com**



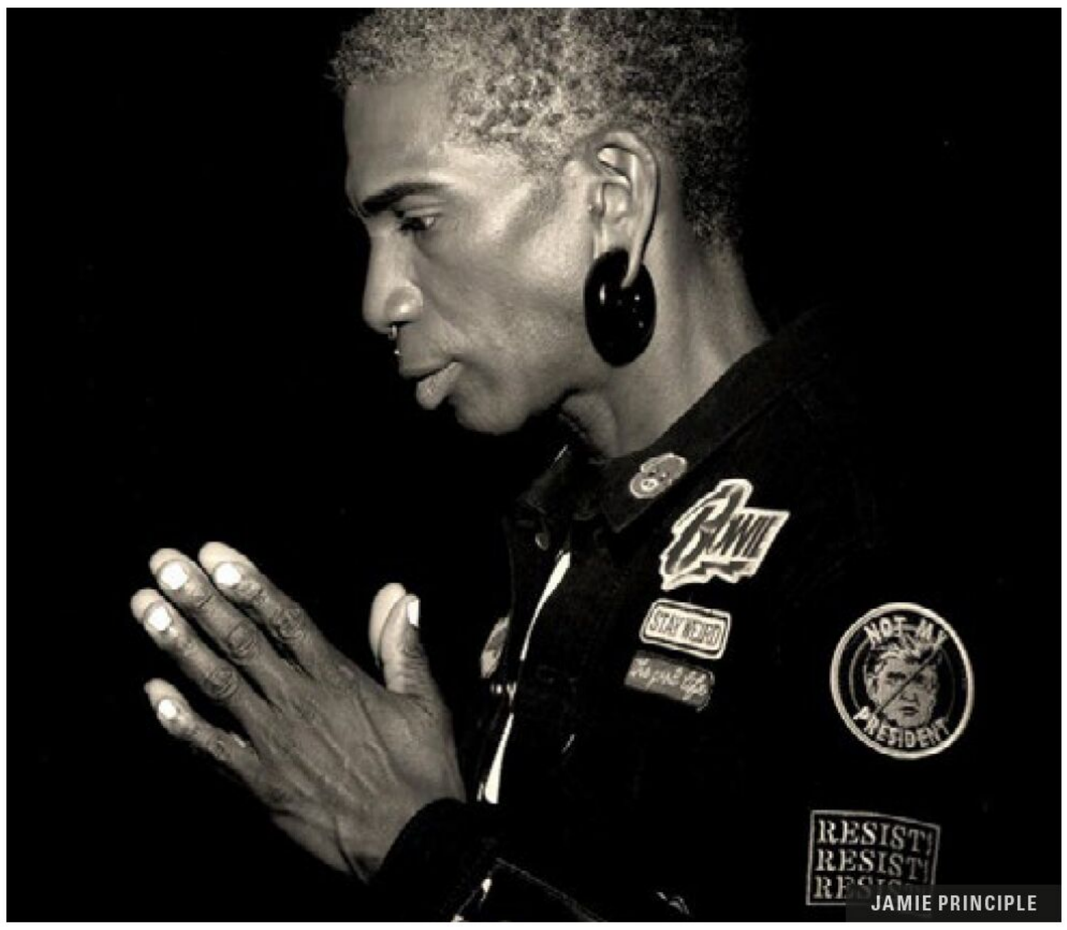
SUPER JUNK

Retro PC goes back to the future

In emulating the aesthetic of Apple computers from the 1980s, Ayaneo's cuboid Mini PC AM01 may look like a throwback to (deep breath now) 40 years ago. In reality, it's near-bursting with high-tech gubbins, and customers can choose between two AMD Ryzen processors, RAM slots allowing for up to 64GB, a max of 2TB of hard drive space, and a big ol' 35-watt high-pressure fan to keep the whole thing cool as a cucumber. For the video gamers out there, operating systems like Steam and Batocera can be installed, as well as versions of Linux, making this a versatile beast. Priced at £150, the first units are expected to start trickling out in spring. **ayaneo.com**

NEEDS MUST

Freewheeling through time and space, **Kris Needs** continues his adventures in sound. This month: **The early days of Chicago house music**



JAMIE PRINCIPLE

The first column scrawled in 2024 finds me sporting a smiley loincloth, deep in the zone writing Nina Walsh's 'Punkadelic!' biography. It's 40 years since the first Chicago house 12-inch records started appearing that Nina would dance to, blissfully trolleyed, in the strawberry smoke at Shoom – ironically, the same year Roland discontinued its TB-303 bass machine!

Built to deep-fry Chicago's underground dance scene that started with Frankie Knuckles' Warehouse and bastard son Ron Hardy's crazed Music Box, January 1984's rudimentary 'On And On' by Jesse Saunders is cited as the first, unwittingly heralding a club-spawned, punk-style revolution driven by the motivation to make something better.

Although not released until a bit later, transcendental time-stoppers were soon being forged by Larry "Mr Fingers" Heard, like 'Can You Feel It' and 'Mystery Of Love', and Marshall Jefferson was fashioning 'The House Music Anthem'. Nina remembers swooning to those at Shoom (and everyone being destroyed by the monstrous juggernaut squelch of Phuture's 'Acid Trax') but her top dancefloor fave at the landmark club remains the orgiastic rumpo-grind of 'Baby Wants To Ride' by Jamie Principle, produced by Frankie Knuckles.

Funnily enough, this steamy, jittering tickler was among the first "Windy City" missives to blow open my own cubicle door after house music hit New York's cooler spots when I lived there in the 80s. A pulsing, electronic lust hydrant ready to explode, straddled by this on-heat diva with the voice of an angel (I sampled his "make me scream" on the first Secret Knowledge single).

This overlooked, fearless pioneer who loved Prince and UK synthpop followed Frankie's previous productions with gorgeous time-stopping love bombs including the exquisite 'Waiting On My Angel', the heart-napalming 'Your Love' and the outrageously beautiful 'Cold World'. The spine-tingling synth intro of 'Your Love' reared again 35 years later on Jagz Kooner's stratospheric remix of Nina and Mr Weatherall's 'Borderland'.

Back to 2024, and following on from the triumphant 'Phonox Nights', Nina unveiled her next album on her annual New Year's Day mix for staunch ally Brother Joseph's online 'Sonic Treasures' extravaganza. 'All That Bluster' by Nina & The Fireflies is both a sister album to 'Phonox Nights' – recorded around the same time with guitarist Franck Alba – and her stunningly evocative lost 'Killing Eve' soundtrack.

Like the gecko sheds his undercrackers, it's all moving on, still celebrating the glorious past but with both eyes on the future. Do check out our 'Into The Cosmic Hutch' podcasts on YouTube!

Corrupted

CORRUPTED - 'Felicific Algorithm / Mushikeras' CD | Shirt

A doom-drone metal behemoth, full of loud sludge, funeral dirge, haunting whispers, howling vocals, and shrouded atmospheres. The mysterious Japanese band are rightly hailed as one of the heaviest and darkest doom metal entities of all time.

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SCAN ME

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Singer Martha Johnson and songwriter Mark Gane of **Martha And The Muffins** discuss the making of their influential 1980 new wave classic, '**Echo Beach**'

INTERVIEW: DAVID POLLOCK

Mark Gane: "David Millar, my classmate at Ontario College of Art, invited me to start a band with him. He knew this woman who sang, and that's how we got Martha on board. Over the summer of 1977 we worked on our sound, but nobody could agree on a band name. David Clarkson of the punk band The Diodes suggested the Muffins as an antidote to all the hardcore punk names. We went, 'OK, just for one gig, then we'll find a better name', which we never did!"

Martha Johnson: "I did Theatre at York University in Toronto, but I was mostly exposed to music through my friends at high school in Thornhill, a northern suburb of Toronto. The Muffins were anti-punk – it didn't work for us. We were new wave, and our influences were things like Roxy Music."

Mark: "We did a five-song demo and our sax player Andy Haas sent it to Interview magazine in New York. He got a postcard back from their music critic Glenn O'Brien, saying something like, 'Loved what I heard, can I do anything for you? By the way, Robert Fripp likes it too'. Apparently he was there when Glenn was playing it! Glenn arranged a gig at Hurrah in New York – the first time we'd played outside of Toronto – and Fripp was there, 20 feet offstage. That was terrifying.

"An A&R guy from Virgin Records also heard it, so he came to Toronto to hear us play, and within four months we'd been offered a contract with Virgin's Dindisc Records. We recorded the first album, with 'Echo Beach' on it, at Manor Studios just outside Oxford. We'd been plucked from our tiny Toronto new wave scene, and suddenly 'Echo Beach' was a big hit."

Martha: "Mark was a dictator. When he taught you a song, you had to sing the notes as he said, and you didn't do a lot of interpretation except with your emotions. I was trying to evoke a feeling of nostalgia and longing for better times, getting away from the humdrum of the present. I'd had lots of boring jobs – I was the one who worked for the government as a clerk."

Mark: "It was the third song I ever wrote, which is my excuse for the unconventional structure. The idea came from this awful summer job I had at art college as a wallpaper inspection clerk in a paint factory, and the second verse came from being down on Lake Ontario, looking back at Toronto at night."

Martha: "It was a good song, it worked really well. I liked the guitar hook and the words were great. I love the way it starts – 'I know it's out of fashion and a trifle uncool / I can't help it, I'm a romantic fool'. It's *very* Roxy Music."

Mark: "I had such a heavy Bryan Ferry influence – the 1930s jazz vibe and cabaret style. I mean, who in their right mind would sing 'a trifle uncool'? You can imagine Noel Coward singing it, and Ferry was channelling that insouciant thing.

"I wasn't a particularly good player in the early days, and the goal was to get from the beginning of a song to the end without making a mistake. The producer of our first two albums, Mike Howlett, rehearsed us to the point where my fingers were bleeding. To his credit, that was a good approach. He also suggested reintroducing the guitar hook in the middle of the song, which I thought was quite brilliant."

PHOTO: PETER NOBLE

Martha: "The staggering of the vocal – the 'Echo beach / Far away in time' at the end – that was very hooky. That was Mike's idea too. Singing that line, I could hear in my voice that I had a cold, it did something that I could never quite reproduce. I liked that tone, a rough, throaty sound, kind of jazzy."
Mark: "The great thing about recording is how idiosyncratic things get captured. Andy Haas had an avant-garde jazz background and he basically refused to do any sax solo twice. The one on 'Echo Beach' was very quirky, and the funny passing melody that works slightly against the chords – it makes it way more interesting."
Martha: "I think he played it once live. We were all shocked!"
Mark: "Yeah, he did that solo note-for-note just once, just to bug us. If you saw the Muffins live, you would not hear that solo. We used two keyboards on early recordings – Martha's Ace Tone Top-9 Combo Organ, and a Wurlitzer electric piano, because of the Roxy Music influence."
Martha: "We opened for Roxy Music on tour in 1980. We played Wembley Arena and the Glasgow Apollo, then we were supposed to go to Europe, but Bryan Ferry got sick. I never met him. Anyway, we were back in Toronto and we got reports of 'Echo Beach' climbing up the British charts, so we came back to tour and do 'Top Of The Pops'. It was very exciting."
Mark: "Virgin really had their PR act together. They rented a restaurant and all the British media were there, or there was a big press thing on Richard Branson's barge. If we'd been signed to a Canadian label, it would have never happened. We'd have gone back to what we were going to do in two years."
Martha: "'Echo Beach' was never a hit in the States because I don't think Virgin knew how to work the music scene there. It was kind of a failure and they pulled out."
Mark: "It would have been a different story if it had done well there. We might have been more on the level of Eurythmics or Simple Minds. We've made a lot of great records since then, though, and been very happy from an artistic point of view.

"We worked with Daniel Lanois for three albums, he introduced us to Brian Eno, and we did a record with David Lord who produced Peter Gabriel and XTC. We went over to his studio in Bath and liked it so much we lived there for two-and-a-half years. But it was ironic that the biggest song for most people was the second single we ever released. Over the 40 years we've been recording, it's let us do lots of other stuff."
Martha: "We're hard to pigeonhole. That's maybe why we didn't go further than we did."
Mark: "Years after I wrote 'Echo Beach' I had a conversation with my dad, and he said any song that triggers that feeling of nostalgia is going to have legs. Something like 'Over The Rainbow' has such a strong feeling of loss and trying to regain something, of wanting a better life to come back. 'Moon River' is another. If I'm lucky, maybe 'Echo Beach' is somewhere in that neighbourhood. I'd love to think so."

For more, visit marthaandthemuffins.com

BANGING ON

More random musings from **Fat Roland**. On his mind this month (as far as we can tell) is '**Doctor Who**'

Have you ever watched a programme called 'Doctor Who'? It's all about this spaceman who goes on holiday in a phone box with a pretend dog and a confusing screwdriver. The phone box is bigger on the inside, which sounds impressive, but I have a mirror above my bed which pretty much achieves the same effect. Doctor Space always looks the same, apart from the times they don't look the same. They keep regenerating into new actors, like Miss Marple or the purple Teletubby.

Sometimes Doctor Space fights evil wheelie bins called Daleks, which shout, "Evacuate, evacuate!" and have toilet plungers for arms. But the best thing about Thingy 'Who' is the theme music. This was made using Sellotape and string because Brian Eno hadn't invented synthesisers yet. The music sounds like a friendly car alarm and was made by the BBC Radiophobic Sweetshop, which was secretly an unpaid woman hiding in a back room.

Joe Meek, who sounds like the worst superhero, had a backing band called The Tornados. Their single 'Telstar' swept across the charts like a, erm, violent weather system comprising largely of rotational wind. They named their hit after a satellite that looked suspiciously like a Cyberman's testicle. The satellite still orbits Earth to this day, although it no longer functions and therefore can't be charged a subscription for reading copies of Electronic Sound with its cosmic telescope.

With the Meek cyberball and the phone box guy, the olden times really were halcyon days for electronic music. Wendy Carlos kidnapped Johann Sebastian Bach and turned him into a synthesiser. Gershon Kingsley replaced his studio gear with popcorn for some reason. Modular synths were embraced by The Doors, who are named after doors you get on spaceships and also other doors. And composer Karlheinz Stockhausen formed the hit-factory Stockhausen Aitkenhausen Watermanhausen.

The simplicity of the 1960s seems quaint now, like remembering an old pair of underpants. In those days, pants were made from traditional materials you could trust, like hessian and barbed wire. Modern new-fangled underpants have breathable fabric and laser beams and Wi-fFi. Where was I going with this? Oh yes. Today's more sophisticated 'Doctor Who' theme uses all sorts of instruments such as computers, kazoos and, erm, I've run out of instruments, but you get my meaning. Murray Gold was asked to write the modern theme because he was better than Murray Silver and Murray Bronze But Later Disqualified For Doping.

Because my brain is a famous musical genius, I have written lyrics to the theme tune. Have a listen. "Who-oooo / Doctor Whoooo / Underpants and uuuunderpaaaants." Give me a call, Murray. Best use a normal phone, though. The big blue one's being attacked by a wheelie bin.

YOU READ MY MIND

National treasure Norris lifts the lid

Richard Norris' memoir, 'Strange Things Are Happening', is out next month on White Rabbit Books, and what a joyous read it is. Aside from his work with The Grid, Psychic TV and Beyond The Wizards Sleeve, it sees Norris telling fragments of memories, with each chapter starting from a particular year in his eclectic life. There is literally never a dull moment. In 1977, he's soaking up the punk revolution, then 10 years later, getting booted out of a Mexican restaurant for playing Phuture's 'Acid Trax' at teatime. Trainspotters head straight to 1984 to hear his A-Level results. An essential read, the hardback is available to preorder for £25, but for £34.99 you can get all that plus a CD chock-full of some of his finest musical work. **whiterabbitbooks.co.uk**

RIDING THE WAVE

Seventh Wave fest returns for number 13

If you are still hooked on Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan's 'The Nation's Most Central Location' – which bagged top spot in our albums of the year list for 2023 – then do yourself a favour and get down to the 13th Seventh Wave Festival of Electronic Music, which is due to take place at The Castle and Falcon in Birmingham on 28 April. Gordon Chapman-Fox will be playing alongside a synth-studded slew of support acts, including the likes of Polypores, APTA and Field Lines Cartographer. Tickets are available now for a shockingly reasonable £17.50, so best get your skates on. **seventhwavefestivalofelectronicmusic.com**

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POLE AND LINE

We take Dubreq's new Stylophone Theremin for a spin

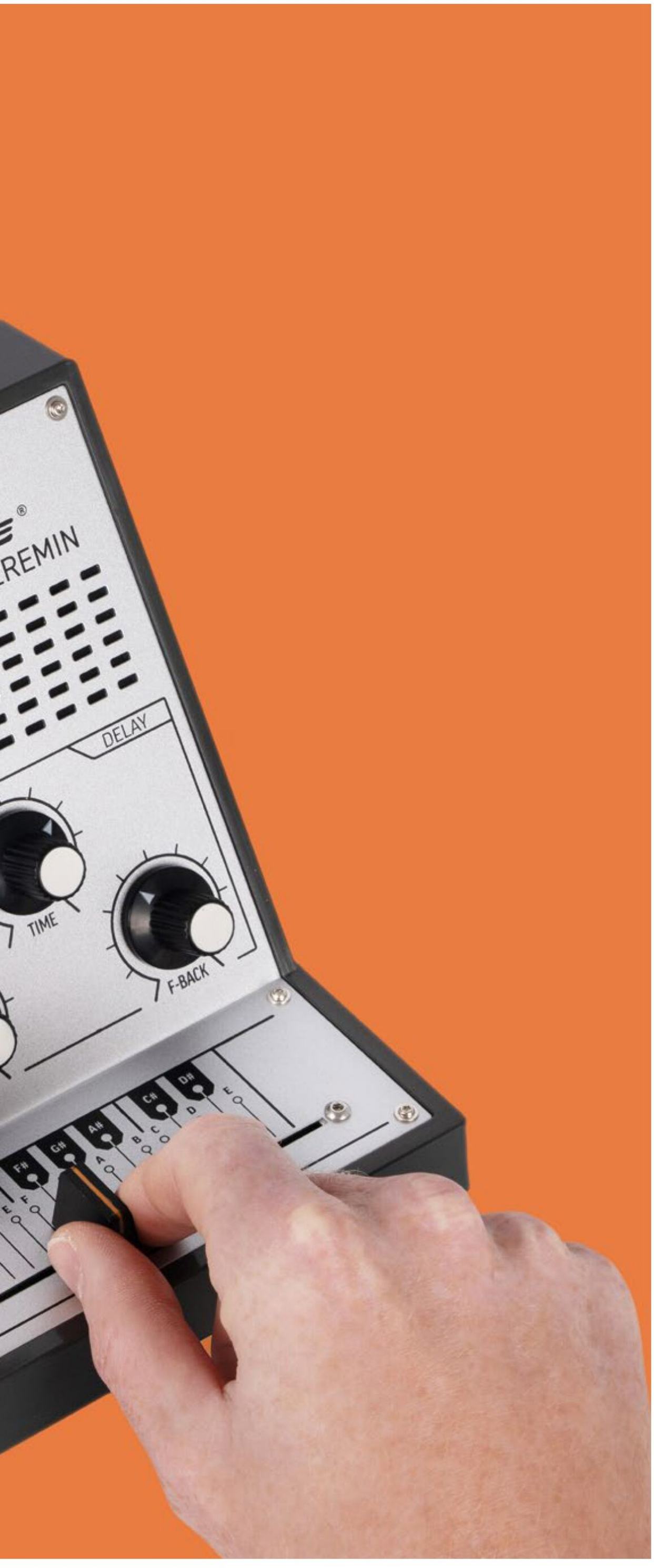
Few gadgets in recent memory have had the Electronic Sound office purring so harmoniously as the Stylophone Theremin. First announced in January, we were stoked when the folks at Dubreq sent us a unit to test drive ahead of a full release in the spring, and we sure didn't hold back.

First things first. This Theremin is hardly a toy, but a highly versatile mini-instrument to be enjoyed by both kitchen-table enthusiasts and studio regulars. Arriving in a box adorned with deliciously retro sci-fi graphics, your first impression will be just how weighty and robust it feels, despite the all-plastic shell. Real energy has been put towards producing a lasting machine, including fool-proofing the antenna – probably the most fragile part – by making it fully rotatable through 360 degrees, thus preventing the heavy-handed among us from accidentally snapping it off.

Being the responsible humans we are, instructions were totally disregarded as we popped six AA batteries under the hood and drove headfirst into forging hands-free radiophonic voodoo. That being said, the fold-out instructions do provide a useful start-up guide, outlining where to position everything before setting off. And trust us, there are many features to get your head around, including delay, decay and pitch functions, switches for altering waveform or activating vibrato and drone, and a pitch slider.

It's a real joy to experiment with. You can choose to mix sounds between the highly responsive antenna and the pitch slider, while the array of knobs make for ultra-smooth twiddling. It may take a little while for you to find your flow and settle on a sound, but a nice secret weapon is the particularly doolally trigger button. Press it, and you'll let off a big electronic raspberry that will zap your composition. It's further boosted by an impressive in-built speaker which fulfils its brief and then some (you can also plug in headphones or hook it up to an amp if you want a more muscular sound).

There's no question Dubreq have pinned the tail on the donkey with their Stylophone Theremin. They hoped it would "redefine the iconic instrument for the 21st century", and they've done so while throwing in lots of nice touches along the way, like the excellent "nerdy section" in the instructions, which explain the actual science behind the piece. Still, the truly shocking part is that it costs all of £90. An absolute snip if you ask us, and you should absolutely get one. Maybe two. **stylophone.com**



PULSE

CHANEL BEADS

NY dreampoppers are stars in the making

WHO?

Chanel Beads is the stage name of Montana artist Shane Lavers. Now based in New York, he regularly performs with fellow creative Maya McGrory, and together they make up one of the most brain-zappingly original bands you'll have come across in a long time. Think AR Kane's raw musicality, throw in the irreverently lo-fi approach of cult experimentalist Dean Blunt, add a dash of Gotham grit and you're halfway there.

WHY CHANEL BEADS?

Their name might evoke luxury, but these Chanel Beads are the kind that might have dropped into the sewers under Wall Street and sprayed out of a grimy fire hydrant behind a disused warehouse in Bushwick. They are DIY through and through, both in terms of sound and visuals. 'Zut Alors', their debut release in 2018, brings to mind Homeshake's gentle indie rock stonerisms. Four years later, however, their startling single 'Ef' lurched towards a much tighter and sharper style, revealing a dreamily introspective take on post-punk that melds acoustic and electronic elements to utter perfection (I challenge anyone to listen to it and not succumb to a compulsion to shout about them from the pulpit). That also goes for 'Police Scanner', their latest beautiful, strings-drenched single featuring violinist Zachary Paul, taken from their upcoming debut album due in April.

TELL US MORE...

After signing to Jagjaguwar during the autumn of 2023, Chanel Beads embarked on their first European tour, with a quick stop-off in London. If anything, the show evidenced that not only can they do it on record, but on stage too, with Lavers' presence beguilingly skittish. Make sure you're hooked up to their socials so you don't miss out next time around.

ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH

'Police Scanner' is out now on Jagjaguwar

NEIL KULKARNI

26 July 1972 – 22 January 2024

ILLUSTRATION: CHUCK D

Music journalist, musician and educator Neil Kulkarni died unexpectedly last month, aged just 51. The core editorial team at Electronic Sound had known Neil since working alongside him at Melody Maker in the 1990s and his death is a shocking loss.

Neil joined Melody Maker as the result of penning a diatribe to the editor for the letters page, taking to task the paper and the whole of the 1990s alternative music scene for its unconscious racial bias. He became a central voice in the venerable music paper's rowdy weekly shouting match. He yelled as much about Royal Trux as he did Wu-Tang Clan, while detecting the whiff of smug nationalism of the Britpop era and later dismantling the gross sexualisation of Britney Spears with an unrepeatable condemnation of the record execs responsible.

He was well-known for his hip hop expertise, and was a tireless champion of Public Enemy. On learning of Neil's death, Chuck D immortalised him with a sketch, which Neil would have loved. His passion for music knew no genre boundaries, though. He was partly shaped by his home town of Coventry and his experience of life as a British Asian kid at a time when The Specials were redefining racial politics in the UK. His obituary for Terry Hall was every bit as passionate as his writing about artists from T. Rex to Mobb Deep.

It's testament to his deep love of music that his favourite band was The Rolling Stones, and yet as a nine-year-old music fanatic Neil was equally enthralled by the golden age of British synthpop. His adoration for Soft Cell, so eloquently drawn on for his Electronic Sound cover feature in December, remained a reference he kept up his whole life, evidenced by him often sporting painted nails and bangles.

Like the man himself, his writing was expressed in the most honest and fearless way he could muster, yet it was also sensitive and emotional. As he wrote in that same cover feature about Soft Cell's 'Tainted Love' debut on 'Top Of The Pops':

"The vulnerability that the song suggested seemed matched by a granite-hard toughness in the performance."

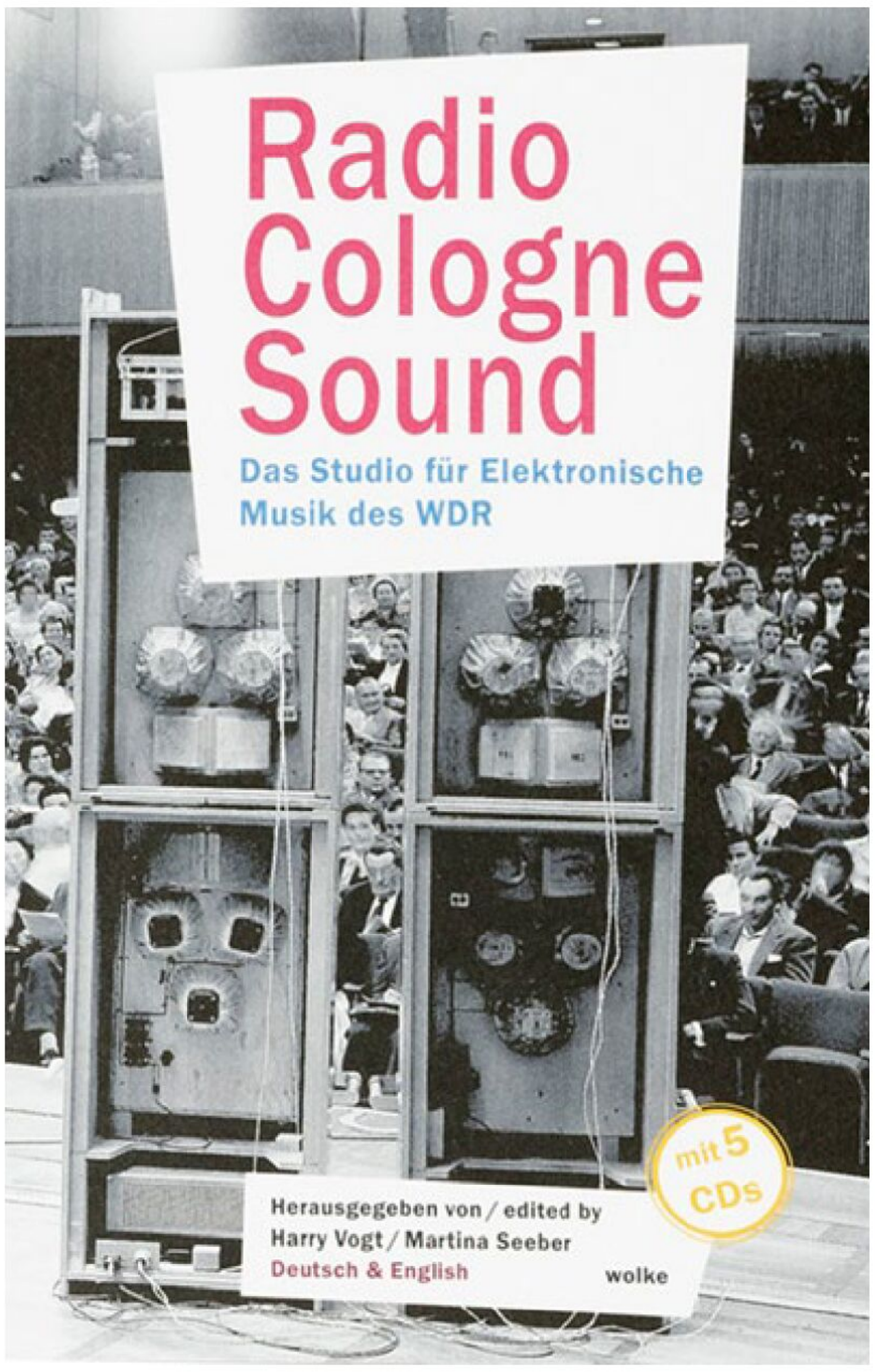
It could be a description of Neil himself.

A GoFundMe page has been launched to raise money for Neil's two daughters at gofundme.com/f/neil-kulkarni

EAU DE COLOGNE

Legendary German studio chronicled

Founded in 1951, Cologne's Studio for Electronic Music of the West German Radio was one of the first of its kind, becoming instrumental in the work of figures like Karlheinz Stockhausen and György Ligeti. 'Radio Cologne Sound: Das Studio Für Elektronische Musik Des WDR' is a fantastic new tome charting its history, featuring portraits of the studio's three key directors – Stockhausen, Herbert Eimert and York Höller. Printed in both German and English, the package comes with a generous five CDs' worth of rare recordings by electronic pioneers Iannis Xenakis, Henri Pousseur, John McGuire and many more. A no-brainer at £35, it's available now. **electronicsound.co.uk/shop**



HEAR NO EVIL

"Semantic hearing" cans? Tell us more...

Now this is the kind of AI innovation that deserves our attention, with a team at the University of Washington having developed a deep-learning algorithm that allows listeners to isolate specific sounds and filter them through their noise-cancelling headphones. One-upping the current tech used in the latest AirPods, this new system has been dubbed "semantic hearing", and it can distinguish between alarms or sirens when you're blasting 'Autobahn' through your lugholes on your weekly shop. Capable of pinpointing 20 categories of sounds, including baby cries, bird chirps, and vacuum cleaners, the researchers behind the project are planning to launch a commercial version somewhere down the line. **semantichearing.cs.washington.edu**

PROFESSIONAL WINER

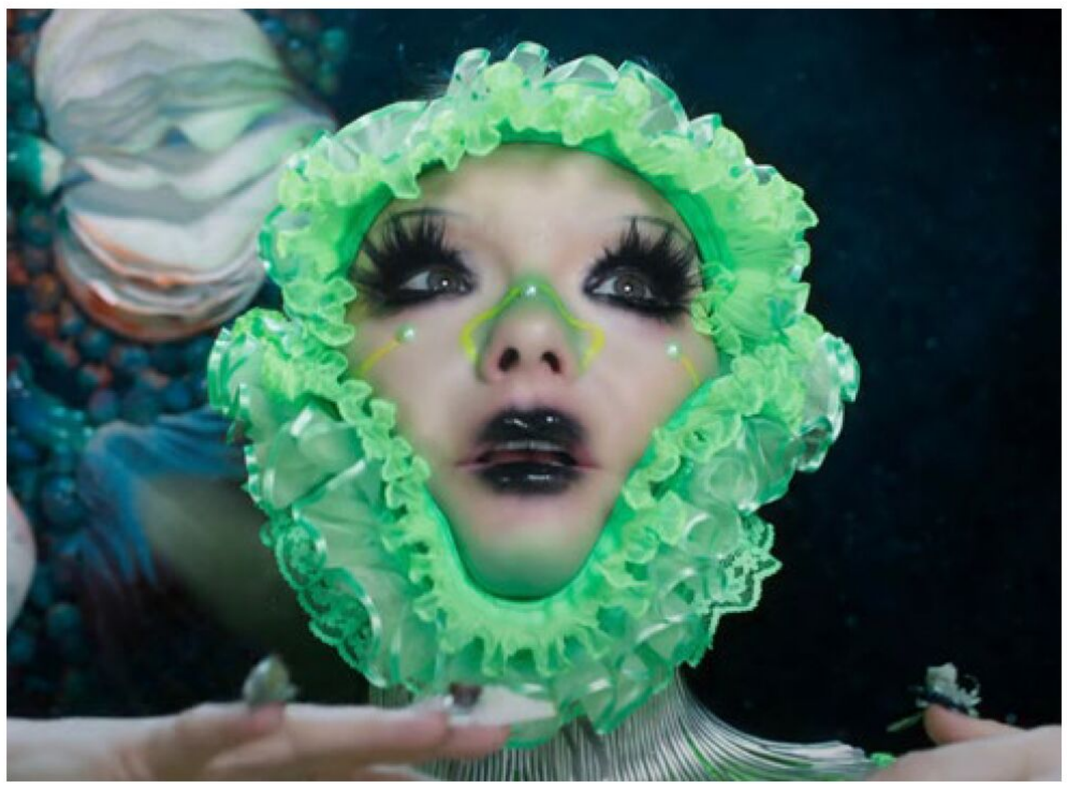
Countercultural poet is back with a bang and a book

As put so succinctly by neoclassical composer Max Richter, "The world finally seems to be catching up to Leslie Winer". Following on from her acclaimed career-spanning compilation 'When I Hit You – You'll Feel It', released on Light In The Attic in 2021, last month Rough Trade Books published 'Pretty Broad Tastes', a "literary and visual trialogue" from Winer, fashion designer Christopher Shannon and artist Linder. Available for £29, the package also gets you a limited edition flexi-disc featuring vocals by Winer and music by Maxwell Sterling. Best hop to it. **roughtradebooks.com**

SHROOMIN

Björk returns to the big screen for fungi-focused flick

From Robert Eggers' 'The Northman' to Lars Von Trier's 'Dancer In The Dark', Björk is no stranger to trying her hand at cinema. The Icelandic star has now lent her unique voice to 'Fungi: The Web Of Life', a documentary exploring the mysterious world of mycelium by following biologist Dr Merlin Sheldrake as he searches for an incredibly precious blue mushroom in Tasmania. "A long-dormant dream of mine to narrate a nature documentary has come to fruition," wrote Björk on X. "I am blessed it is not just any, but featuring the magnificent Merlin Sheldrake, and about fungi." Head online to find out where you can watch it. **fungimovie.com**



PULSE

THE NAKED FLAME

Synthwaver painting the town neon

WHO?

Sci-fi ambience. Chunky synthlines. Synthwave sensibilities. Meet Norwich's Edward Knights, aka The Naked Flame, who since 2013 has been releasing all manner of electronically charged frequencies, spurred on by his time studying Music and Technology at the University of East Anglia.

WHY THE NAKED FLAME?

Knights' first showing was the expansive 'Fresh Start', a terrific EP of instrumentals. It was then followed in 2014 by the 'Sparks' EP, which bagged him a spot as one of DJ Mag's up-and-coming artists, as well as airtime on BBC Introducing. Released in February, his latest album 'Aurora' is another step forward. It's awash with echoing electronic textures and punchy bass rhythms, and at times is redolent of Vangelis' 'Blade Runner' soundtrack. There's lots to like. Take 'Keplar', with its sky-high electro stabs which spiral into a triumphant melody. Counter that with 'Endless Love', which takes a slightly more sombre approach to electropop. And then there's 'Procon4', with its thick slabs of synth and computerised rhythmic glitches. It's straight out of the top drawer.

TELL US MORE...

Since 2018, Knights' output has been pretty impressive, releasing an album every year. "I started listening to more synthwave artists after seeing the film 'Drive' in 2011," he says, and it comes as no surprise that Kavinsky's 'Nightcall' and Electric Youth's 'A Real Hero' are the tunes that "really grabbed him". But he's also influenced by the likes of Kraftwerk, Depeche Mode, Air, Massive Attack and Röyksopp. Roll on The Naked Flame's 2024 album then, because judging by 'Aurora', Knights is going from strength to strength.

FINLAY MILLIGAN

'Aurora' is out now via Bandcamp

TAPE SPOILS

VHS returns with a bang

Vice Press should be on the radar of any self-respecting retrophile. The Sheffield company specialise in limited edition collectibles, predominantly covering sci-fi and horror gems from the 1980s, and last year they even launched their own line of VHS tapes under the banner of Vice Press Home Video. Their first release is a tasty and officially licensed re-release of Sam Raimi's 1987 cult comedy horror 'Evil Dead II' – the first time it's been available on the format in over 25 years. All 500 copies were snapped up pretty sharpish, but keep your eyes peeled for more tapes coming soon. **vice-press.com**

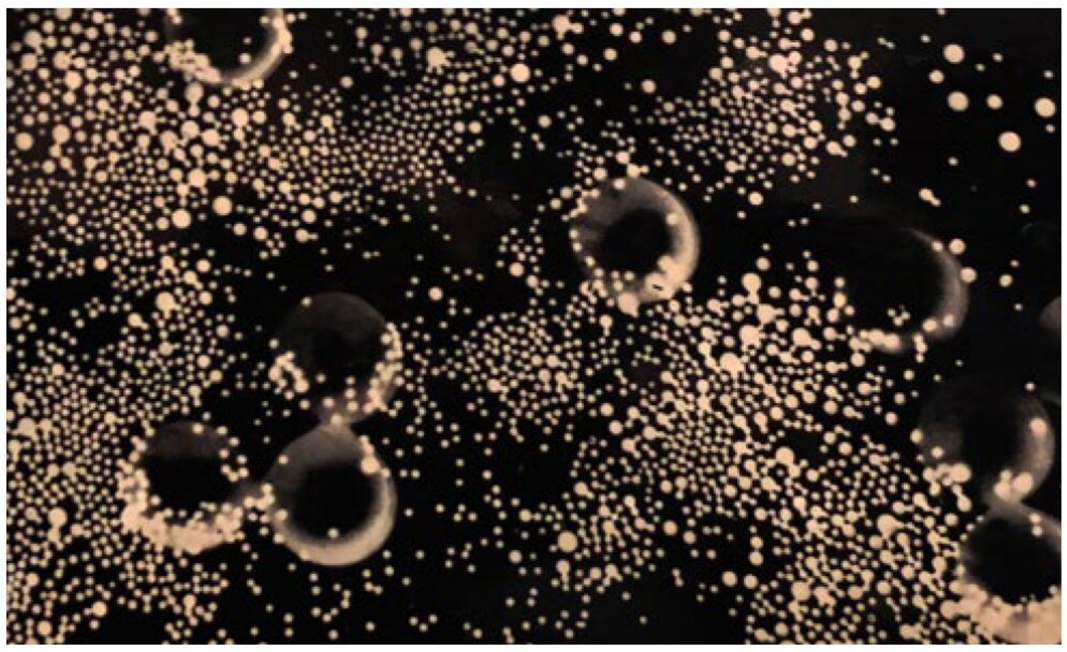
DECK THE HALLS

Japanese platter is well worth the wait

We've always got our ear to the ground when it comes to funky turntables, and the Luxman PD-191A has been one we've been looking forward to for a little while. The Japanese audiophiles' newest item boasts an original, newly developed tonearm designed specifically for picking up every musical nuance in your vinyl collection, and coupled with a "silent and refined" motor belt-drive, you've got yourself a diamond home listening experience. You're looking at around £11,000 (though prices vary depending on the distributor), but the level of industrial modernism Luxman bring to the table will make it money well spent. **luxman.com**

THE SCHOOL OF ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Resident archivist **Jack Dangers** looks at the album '**Musique Expérimentale**', a collection of releases from renowned Paris tape music innovators Le Group De Recherches Musicales De La RTF



Le Group De Recherches Musicales (GRM) has its roots in Groupe De Recherches De Musique Concrète (GRMC), which was established in 1951 in a purpose-built studio at Radiodiffusion Télévision Française (RTF) – the French national broadcaster. Pierre Schaeffer was the director, Pierre Henry the composer, and Jacques Poullin the engineer who was able to build devices they designed. Machines like the Morphophone – a tape delay with 10 playing heads which allowed them to process sounds with echo and also affect their timbre and dynamics.

As Schaeffer became more busy giving talks and with meetings outside the studio, Henry was left in charge and started to use the facility to create work for his collaborations with choreographers and filmmakers. Schaeffer was unhappy about the way things had been going in his absence, so in 1958 he re-asserted control over the direction of the studio and brought in new composers, which resulted in Henry leaving and establishing his own studio.

'Musique Expérimentale' came out in 1962 on a French label called BAM, a classical music label that had been releasing records since the 1930s. It's the first release credited to Le Group De Recherches Musicales De La RTF and, as far as I'm aware, it's the first use of the phrase "experimental music" on a record. Releases in the 1950s had titles like 'Tape Recorder Music' or 'New Music'.

It certainly is uncompromising in its experimentalism, with works by Luc Ferrari, François-Bernard Mâche (a group member from 1958 to 1963), Romuald Vandelle, Michel Philippot, and André Boucourechliev who had attended the Darmstadt Summer Course music sessions – a who's who of modernist and experimental composers in the 1950s – and had studied with Luciano Berio. In 1964 there was a second LP, 'Musique Expérimentale II', which also featured Luc Ferrari and François-Bernard Mâche, with new names Ivo Malec, François Bayle, Philippe Carson and Earle Brown.

The GRM became a national institution for experimental electronic and tape music techniques and it's still going to this day. Composers including Karlheinz Stockhausen and Iannis Xenakis have passed through the studio, with Schaeffer mentoring students like Éliane Radigue and Jean-Michel Jarre along the way.

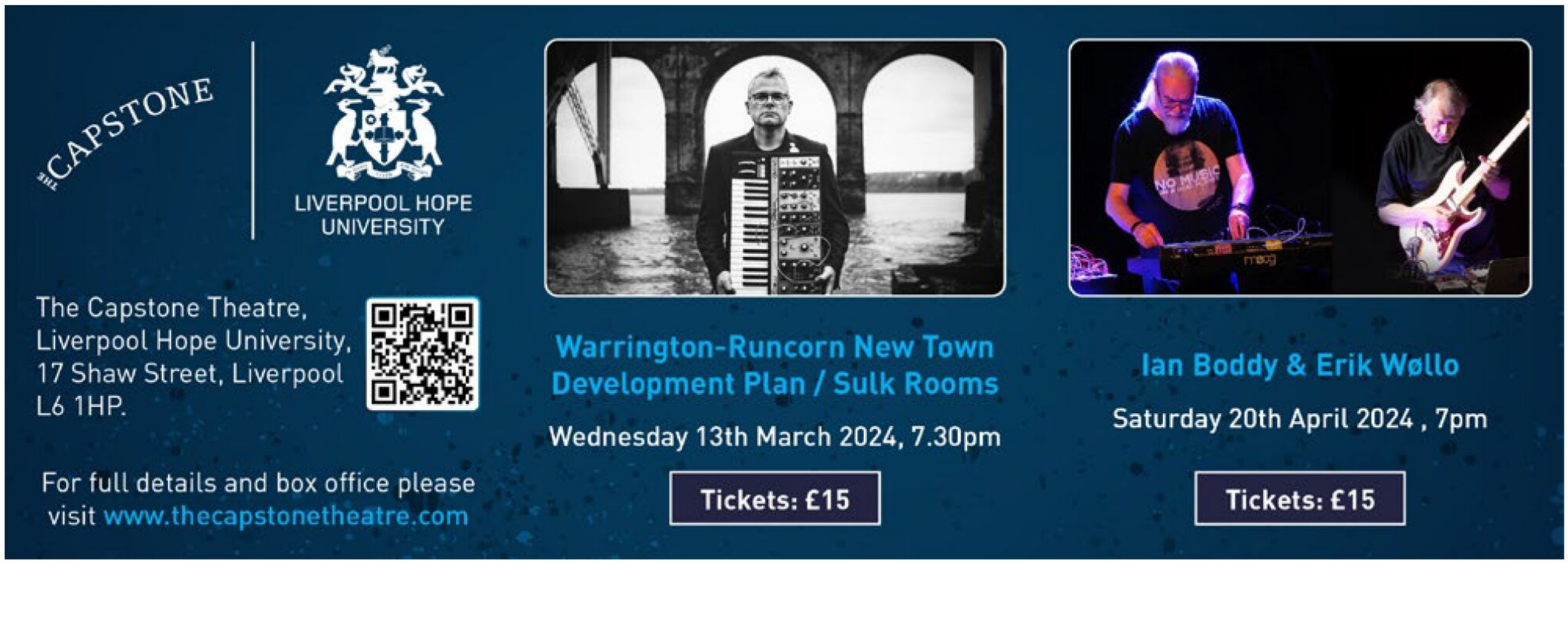
Today, you can use their free software, GRM-Player, which they describe as "a true laboratory of the digital tape recorder". Inspired by the techniques of musique concrète which Pierre Schaeffer pioneered, it enables you to make edits and micro-edits and have multiple "tape heads" playing the same sound file.

Original pressings of both albums are fairly easy to find and are not that expensive either, and they've both been reissued several times over the decades. Finders Keepers sub-label Cacophonic re-released the 1962 LP a few years ago.

PIN-UP MODEL

Will this smart tech usurp the iPhone?

This is the much-vaunted AI Pin from Silicon Valley company Humane. It attaches to your clothes to become a portable smart assistant – sort of like a phone, but rather than relay information to a screen, it projects directly onto your hand or a nearby surface. Crazy, eh? After connecting it to a network provider, you can make calls, take pictures or ask questions. The very first units were shipped out at the end of January, so we'll find out before too long whether we humans really are ready for a "post-screen" world. Either way, this £550 gadget is one to keep tabs on. **hu.ma.ne**



UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Bristol producer/DJ Jim Coles – aka **Om Unit** – has been exploring the outer reaches of dub, hip hop and downtempo for over 20 years. With the reissue of his 2013 debut album, 'Threads', he delves into the elements that shape him and his music

INTERVIEW: ROBERT HARRIS

SCIENCE FICTION

"As a literary form, science fiction is incredibly useful. It goes further than mere fiction in creating other-world scenarios, and in doing so perhaps better reflects the human condition. I believe that science fiction is the modern equivalent of mythology, and it exists out of pure necessity in today's world as an exploration of how our technological growth might exist in parallel to being human.

"Jean-Michel Basquiat said, 'Art is how we decorate space. Music is how we decorate time'. So for me, the idea of making 'sonic fiction' is generating time-based narratives designed to invoke a sense of other worlds. I believe exploring science fiction can help to influence and inspire the creative mind. Feeding the imagination and sparking curiosity around sonic possibilities."

SOLITUDE

"The Swiss psychologist, Marie-Louise Von Franz, once quoted the Hellenic occult author, Hermes Trismegistus, who said, 'I am the friend of whoever is lonely'. I feel that Von Franz framed this statement as a message of validation to those who crave and enjoy solitude, when she explained that to be alone for a length of time is very helpful in making a connection with one's unconscious mind.

"To have a sense of our unconscious mind, and to get familiar with it, is a very powerful tool. Since I was a child, I've enjoyed a sense of freedom in being alone with my thoughts and creative processes. Too much of this is painful, of course, but in general I do find it's the main source of my ability to make music in the way that I do, and do it best."

SPIRITUALITY

"If we look out into the world, and human history, it seems that the search for 'spirituality', and deriving some meaning from our time here, is vital to the human experience. So many paths have been taken, and so much has been said and written, it's important to explore every possibility when it comes to spiritual teachings. I've often been drawn back to various philosophies in order to enhance my life, and have learned more about myself, which has influenced how I choose to interact with my creative side.

"I believe that music is the language of the spirit. Using tools – electronic and acoustic – combined with song, whether story-based or devotional, we have constructed this language to communicate emotion that can cut through the subjective experience and transmit a shared state. I like Alan Moore's take on art and magick, in that he feels they are interchangeable, that the process of 'making' art is to manufacture experiences that alter consciousness. Understanding spirituality in a general sense has been a very good tool for my own creativity."

HONESTY

"The American author and 'business thinker' Seth Godin said, 'If you need to conceal your true nature to get in the door, understand that you'll probably

have to conceal your true nature to keep that job'. So much of what we do as artists nowadays is subject to temptation in terms of how technology has harnessed human beings' need for dopamine. I believe that we now live in a world where most of the planet is highly addicted to short-term and short-lived dopamine reward.

"One of the major traps that we face today is the temptation to change how we create in order to get the biggest dopamine hit, in the fastest way possible. I do sense a growth in disingenuous artistic activity, which is driven by this addiction to instant gratification. I've found that being as honest as possible when making music, and trying not to be too influenced by the perceived pressure to 'keep up' that social media presents us, has helped me to feel more deeply connected, and ultimately more pleased, with the work I've done in recent years."

TEACHING

"One of the best decisions I have made is to teach classes in music production. People are often surprised to hear that I teach. I think many of them assume that I'm living 'the dream' of being a full-time artist. Being a full-time artist is overrated, and having a function in the world that balances the sometimes solitary, subjective role with something more societally cohesive and objective can be very enriching. To put it bluntly, standing in front of a class of people who have no idea who you are and don't actually care that much is enormously levelling.

"Occasionally, I have students who are aware of what I do, but mostly it's the siloed identity of teacher, rather than artist, that I find keeps me grounded egotistically and has meant that I've really had to learn how to communicate at a high level. This has led to further self-awareness of my own creativity, which has been immensely valuable. Another benefit is staying in touch with the newest tools for making music – learning both from my students and the research I do to update my course content each year."

DUB

"To me, dub music is the art of using an audio mixer as an instrument. Born out of reggae, it's now incorporated into many musical forms. This method of manipulating the nature of sound over time has been pivotal in terms of breaking new ground with my own practice. Until I dived into this style of music-making, I'd become too fixed around sitting, clicking a mouse and staring at a screen – and my music had begun to sound like it, too!

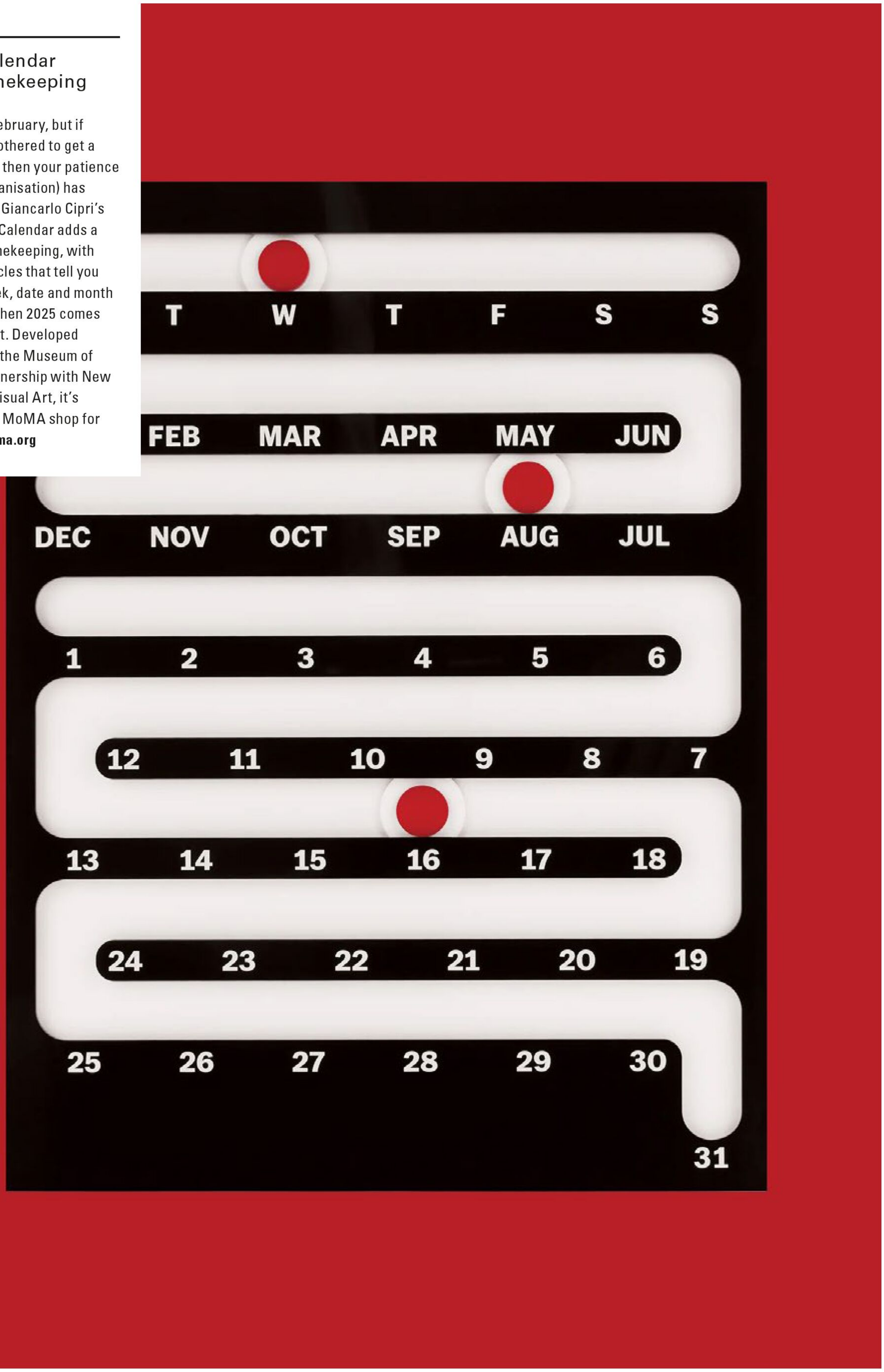
"The gift that dub reggae's pioneers gave to the world is priceless. For me, engaging with dub creates much more human, organic and alive-sounding music. A music that people want to go back to. I'm drawn to it because, while it feels playful, there's also a technological edge to dub. Something that asks the question, 'How can you do this differently?'."

The remastered 10-year anniversary edition of 'Threads' is out now on Civil Music

CHEAP DATES

Perpetual calendar reinvents timekeeping

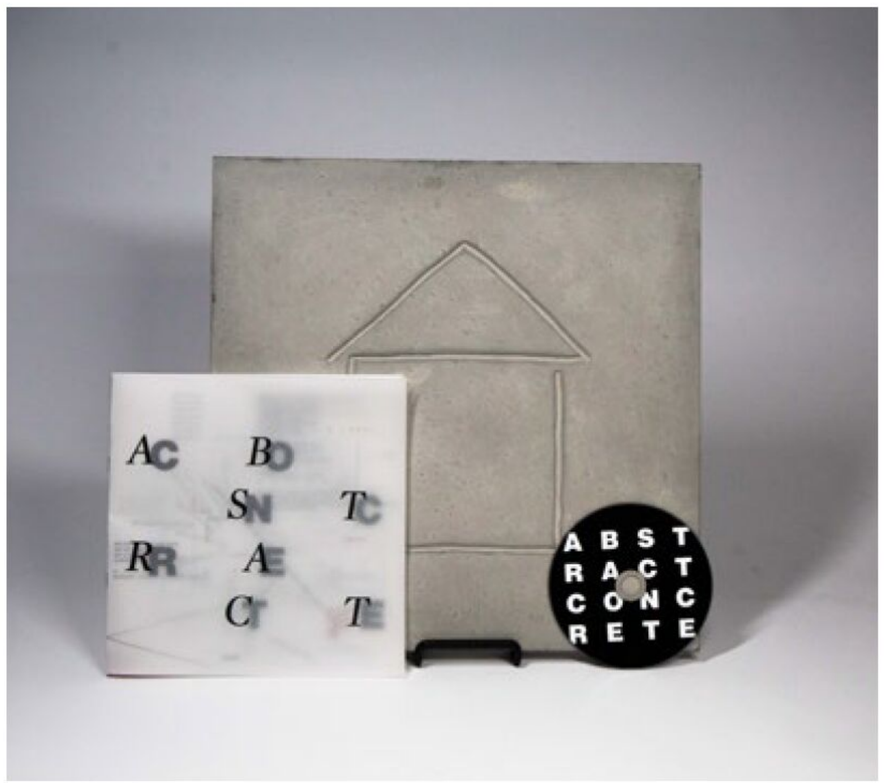
It's already mid-February, but if you still haven't bothered to get a calendar for 2024, then your patience (or chronic disorganisation) has paid off. Designer Giancarlo Cipri's Sliding Perpetual Calendar adds a kinetic edge to timekeeping, with three movable circles that tell you the day of the week, date and month of the year. And when 2025 comes around? Just reset. Developed by Cipri as part of the Museum of Modern Art's partnership with New York's School of Visual Art, it's available from the MoMA shop for just £52. **store.moma.org**



SHIT A BRICK

New album arrives encased in concrete

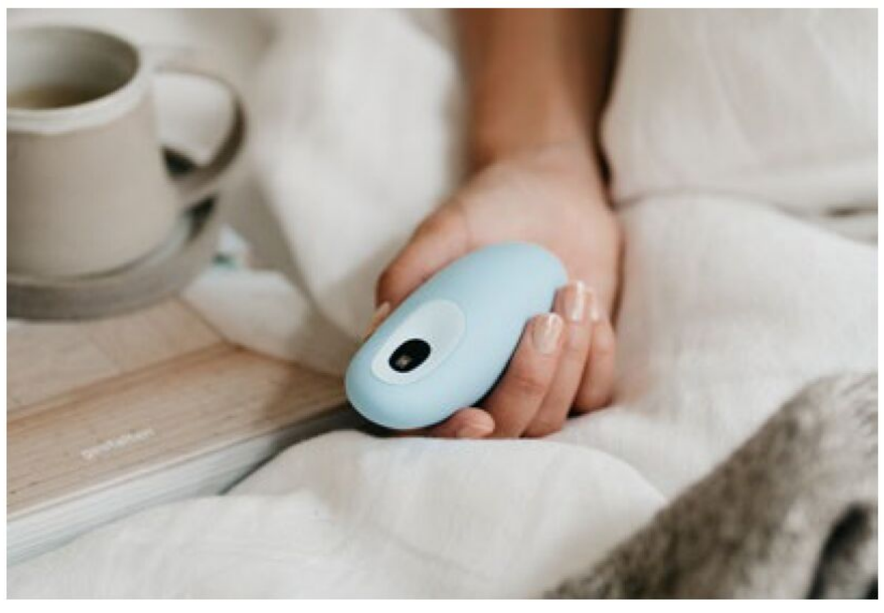
As co-founder of proto post-punksters This Heat, Charles Hayward is no stranger to doing things a little differently. But encasing his new album 'Abstract Concrete' in actual concrete is pretty far out, even for him. Limited to 51 copies (or rather slabs), customers are given advance warning that they will have to smash the thing open if they ever want to play the record inside. At £151, that might be a, er, hard sell. But if you want to try before you buy, you can bag the regular wax edition for £27. Hot tip – the discofied post-punk goodies inside are absolutely recommended. **thestate51conspiracy.com**

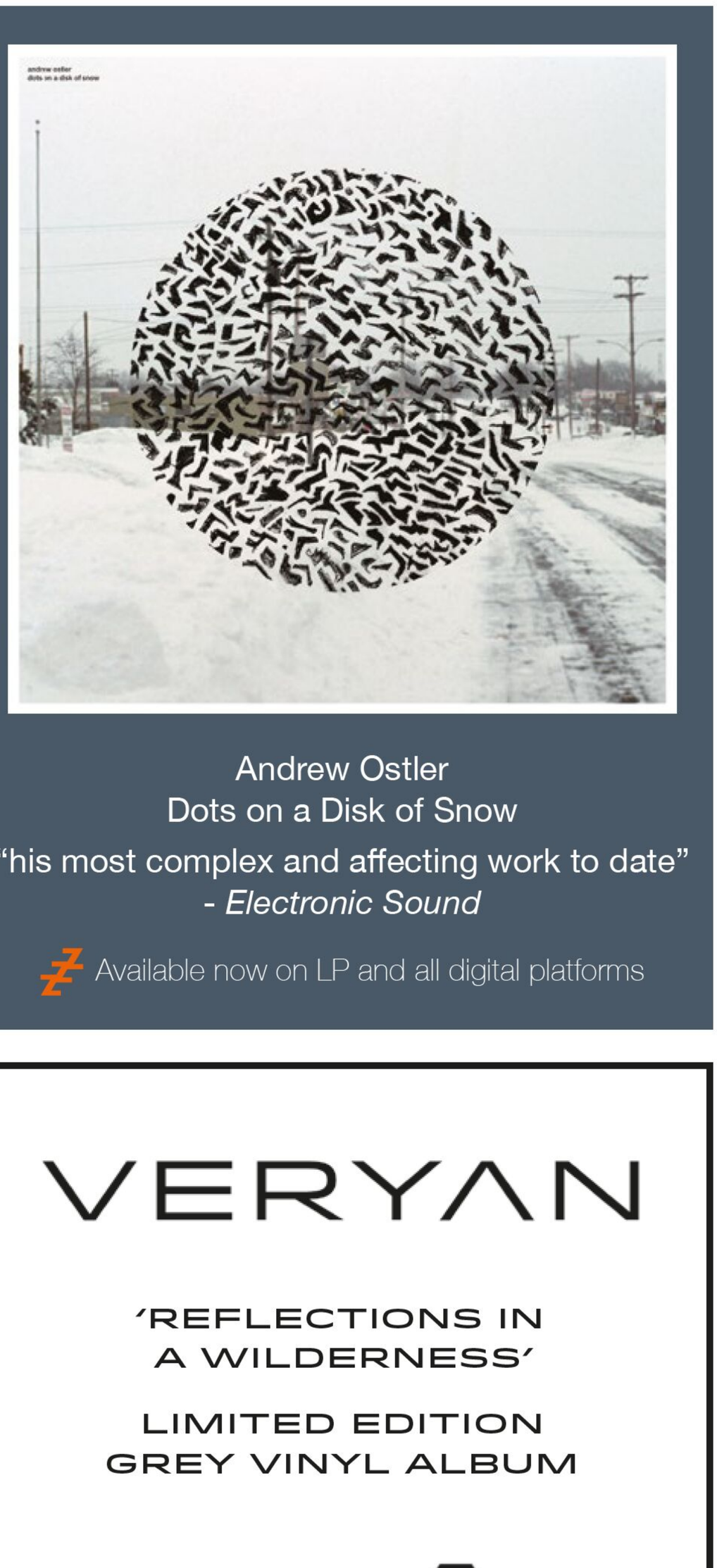


BREATHING BOOM

Device helps you inhale properly

Are you overstressed and anxious about when the next issue of Electronic Sound will plop onto your door mat? Well, Moonbird is a clever gadget scientifically proven to help you stay calmer and sleep better. Like a stress ball in reverse, it changes shape to guide you while breathing, so when it expands, breathe in, and out again when it contracts. Simple. On top of that, it can also be used with a corresponding phone app to track how it affects your heart rate. Its bold claims about treating sleep and anxiety are backed up by peer reviewed studies, so never mind catching the worm – this £159 birdie will guarantee a good night's kip. **moonbird.life**





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RUBBER SOUL

Speaker puts duffed-up trainers to good use

The Sole Speaker is the result of a collaboration between Swedish audio company Transparent and lifestyle brand Axel Arigato. Rather ingeniously, Transparent's modular TS-W speaker is housed inside a cabinet made entirely of repurposed rubber, sourced from the rejected soles of Axel Arigato trainers.

"To craft the Sole Speaker's cabinet, the process involves shredding soles into particles that then undergo a specialised binding process," Arigato explain. "As a result, crumbling may occur naturally and should not be considered a fault. Take care when handling your Sole Speaker." Well, what else did you need that £1,400 for? **transpa.rent**

PULSE

DERMABRASION

Bogs, ghouls and “electronic body horror”

WHO?

Torontonians Adam Bernhardt and Kat McGouran make music for those who like goth rock scintillatingly intense, brimming with electronic percussion and only *just* on the right side of horrifying. Collectively, the duo are known as Dermabrasion, and while the name might make you think of surgical skin planing, what this pair actually offer is far more intriguing. And a bit less painful.

WHY DERMABRASION?

It’s difficult to avoid comparisons with Siouxsie And The Banshees when talking about Dermabrasion, chiefly because McGouran’s tortured yet commanding vocal style is so undeniably reminiscent of Ms Sioux. But there’s a lot that is novel and appealing about their sound too. The suffocatingly murky feel of tracks like 2022’s ‘Dragula’ is inescapably addictive, while their frequently room-shaking basslines sound like they have the power to eat you up, if they so desired. Couple this with Dermabrasion’s trademark crack of machine-gun drums and thick, gritty layers of guitars, and you get killer cuts like ‘Goblin Dance’, which is deliriously mesmeric on account of its unbridled brutality.

TELL US MORE...

Bernhardt and McGouran released ‘Pain Behaviour’, their debut album, at the tail end of January. Featuring ‘Goblin Dance’ plus nine other tracks, one highlight is ‘Halberdier’, which sees a cold, menacing intro dominated by enormous, hollowed-out drums that morph into a battle between industrial strength guitars and McGouran’s electrifying howls. It’s the perfect lead single for a record that its creators consider to be reminiscent of “beer-flavoured ghouls smoking outside venues that no longer exist”, and even “the backed-up toilet smell” that hangs in the air around the back of your favourite nightclub. Lovely.

IMOGEN BEBB

‘Pain Behaviour’ is out now on Hand Drawn Dracula

A new album, '**Under The Island: Experimental Music In Ireland 1960-1994**', focuses on an amazing bunch of late 20th century Irish bedroom producers and their early, lo-tech tinkerings

WORDS: WILL SIMPSON

It's 1977. While punk is raging in London, across the Irish Sea in one of the faraway towns, a 16-year-old Dubliner is fiddling around with a Dictaphone.

"I developed a fascination with them," remembers Daniel Figgis. "I was in a band at the time, called Normal Service. Our concerts weren't going well, and I didn't really like the inclinations of the other members. So I thought I'd try a more esoteric approach."

He decided to deconstruct one of the group's performances, using one of their tape recordings, a pair of scissors and Sellotape. The result, 'Look! I'm Running!', is a three-way sonic argument between a rock band, a Space Invaders machine and an artillery gun. It wasn't the first time Figgis had used a Dictaphone in this way.

"One time, my aunt and uncle were having an argument. I recorded it, and then while they were continuing to talk I played excerpts from the earlier argument to plug the holes in their conversation. They started to argue with the earlier version of themselves and that fascinated me.

"I have no recollection of playing 'Look! I'm Running!' to anybody. But I must have played it to my parents. I grew up in working-class Dublin, in a classic kitchen sink drama scenario where we lived with my grandparents. We had an outside toilet – you'd have to go down four flights of stairs in the middle of the night and out into the back yard if you wanted to have a pee."

'Look! I'm Running!' is just one of a number of pieces on 'Under The Island: Experimental Music In Ireland 1960-1994', a new compilation cataloguing the experimental music being created in Ireland in the late 20th century. It's revelatory, in that it shows that far from what was perceived to be the hub of cutting-edge music at that time – London, New York or Düsseldorf – extraordinary, forward-thinking sounds were being created, often with the most basic of technology.

The phrase "lo-fi" barely covers it. There's Sean O'Huiginn's 'Flostic', also from 1977, which uses dental floss, elastic bands and an oven rack to create what sounds like the cries of a distressed Clanger. And 'Lake Waters Of Sorrow' by Nigel Rolfe, a piece which poses the question – what would a bodhrán sound like if you filled it with milk and blew rose petals across the tensile surface? Answer: like Moomins dancing on a frozen lake.

Meanwhile, Danny McCarthy's 'Music For An Electric Hurling Stick' is exactly that – a piece played on a hurling stick plus strings and pickup. It was part of a series of experiments that employed sports equipment as instruments.

All these upend preconceived notions of what music is. There's the otherworldly opener 'Esoteric Sound Poem' (1960), a stirring, six-minute sonic coagulation of contorted samples by Desmond Leslie, an ex-Spitfire pilot and true maverick who became a pioneer of musique concrète (his music was sporadically featured on 'Doctor Who').

Perhaps most astonishing, though, is Roger Doyle's 'Tape Piece One'. Recorded in 1971 at his parents' house in Dublin and using tools that many teenagers would have had in their bedroom at the time – a tape recorder, a radio and a record player – Doyle constructed a collage that juxtaposes,

DESMOND LESLIE IN AMERICA, 1954. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LESLIE FAMILY

among other things, 'Peer Gynt', 'Greensleeves', The Beatles, the BBC News, 'Theme From A Summer Place' and 'God Save The Queen'. It's 'Revolution 9', but more brazen and defiant – joyful, even.

"In some respects, the Roger Doyle piece is the marker," suggests Dave Clifford, who wrote the sleeve notes to 'Under The Island'. "It's someone reaching out from the DIY dark of Ireland at that time and making something… quite psychotic really. It stitches together film, religion, pop, the news and comedy in musical form. It's a fantastic piece of work."

Clifford was familiar with many of the names on the compilation. Best-known for Vox, the early 1980s fanzine that was Ireland's version of Sniffin' Glue, his essay paints a picture of a nation as a cultural wasteland, dominated by the Catholic church and the showbands. By the late 1970s, though, change was arriving, and 'Under The Island' places these sound artists – who were largely working in isolation from each other – as heroic outliers. They were part of and, in some cases predated, punk's cultural earthquake.

Probably the most famous name on the compilation is David Cunningham, head Flying Lizard, who was brought up in Armagh but left for Maidstone College of Art in 1973.

"I don't think of myself as an Irish artist," he says today. "I mean, my accent has gone – it's just disappeared over 47 years."

His contribution to the album, 'UI 58', is an experiment he made in 1976.

"It was, 'Let's just try and see what happens'. I made a tape loop of one note on the Stylophone, played it on the tape recorder and overdubbed it three or four times on the Revox. It was the very first time I had done anything like this with overlaying tapes of the same material.

"At the time, I wasn't aware of anyone doing anything similar in Ireland. I mean, out of the whole of our sixth form pretty much everyone went to university in Dublin or mainland UK. The Northern Irish culture was very chauvinist, anti-art, anti-women, anti-gay, anti-Catholic, and if they'd had enough black people it would have been racist too."

By then, Cunningham was well on his way to a long career in experimental music, which took him around the world and some time later, into the 'Top Of The Pops' studio. Roger Doyle ended up working at the highest level in theatre and music composition, Nigel Rolfe worked in performance art, Danny McCarthy as a sound artist, while Daniel Figgis himself signed a record deal at 19 and has sustained a 40-year career in left-field music, with a new album out in 2024. For all these artists there was a happy ending.

For Ireland too. 'Under The Island' reveals that beyond rock and folk music, the country has an experimental tradition as rich as any other European nation.

"It's a huge and valuable document," says Dave Clifford. "And now it's a piece of cultural history – something to have in your hand, to say 'this happened'."

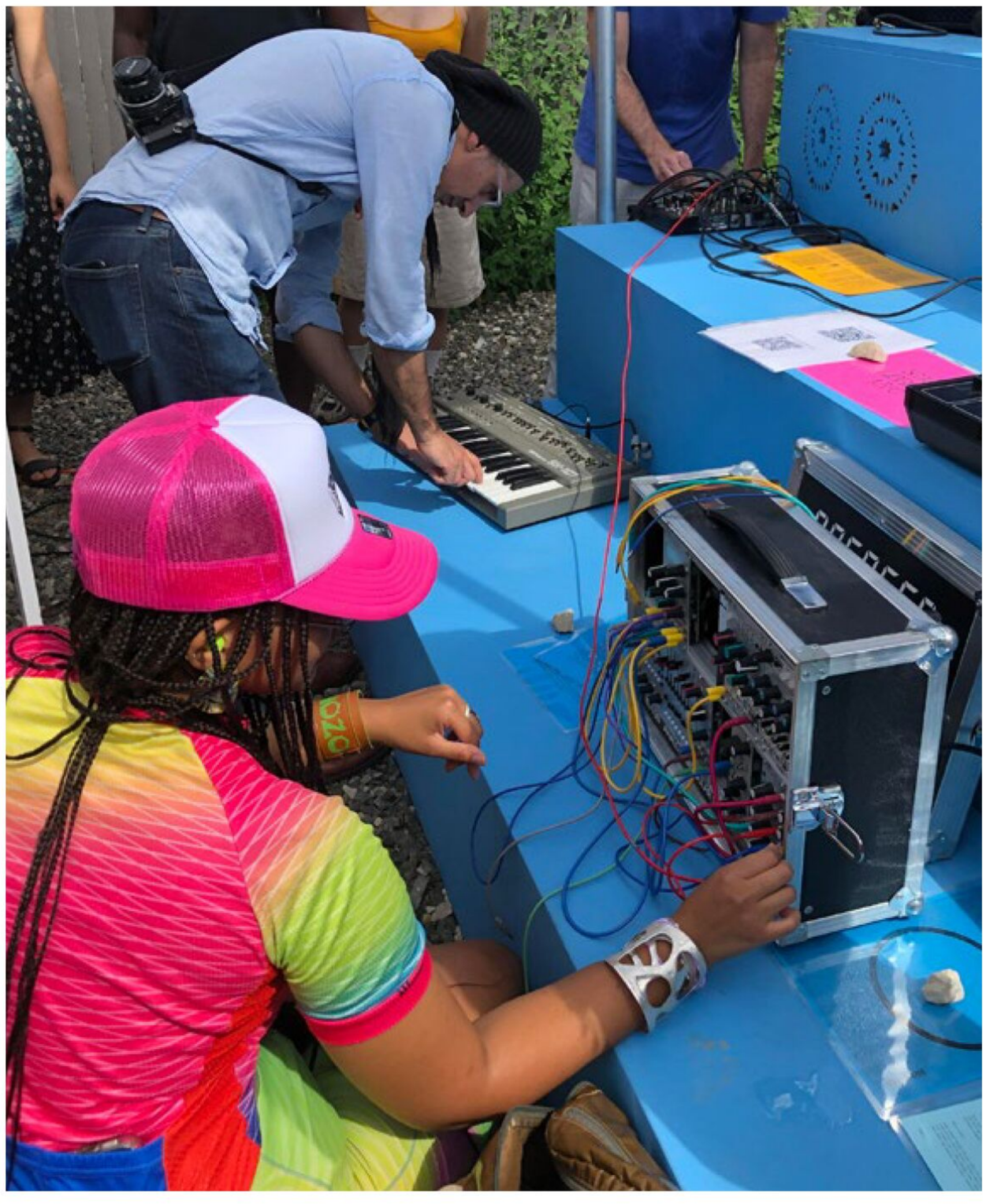
'Under The Island: Experimental Music In Ireland 1960-1994' is out now on Nyahh

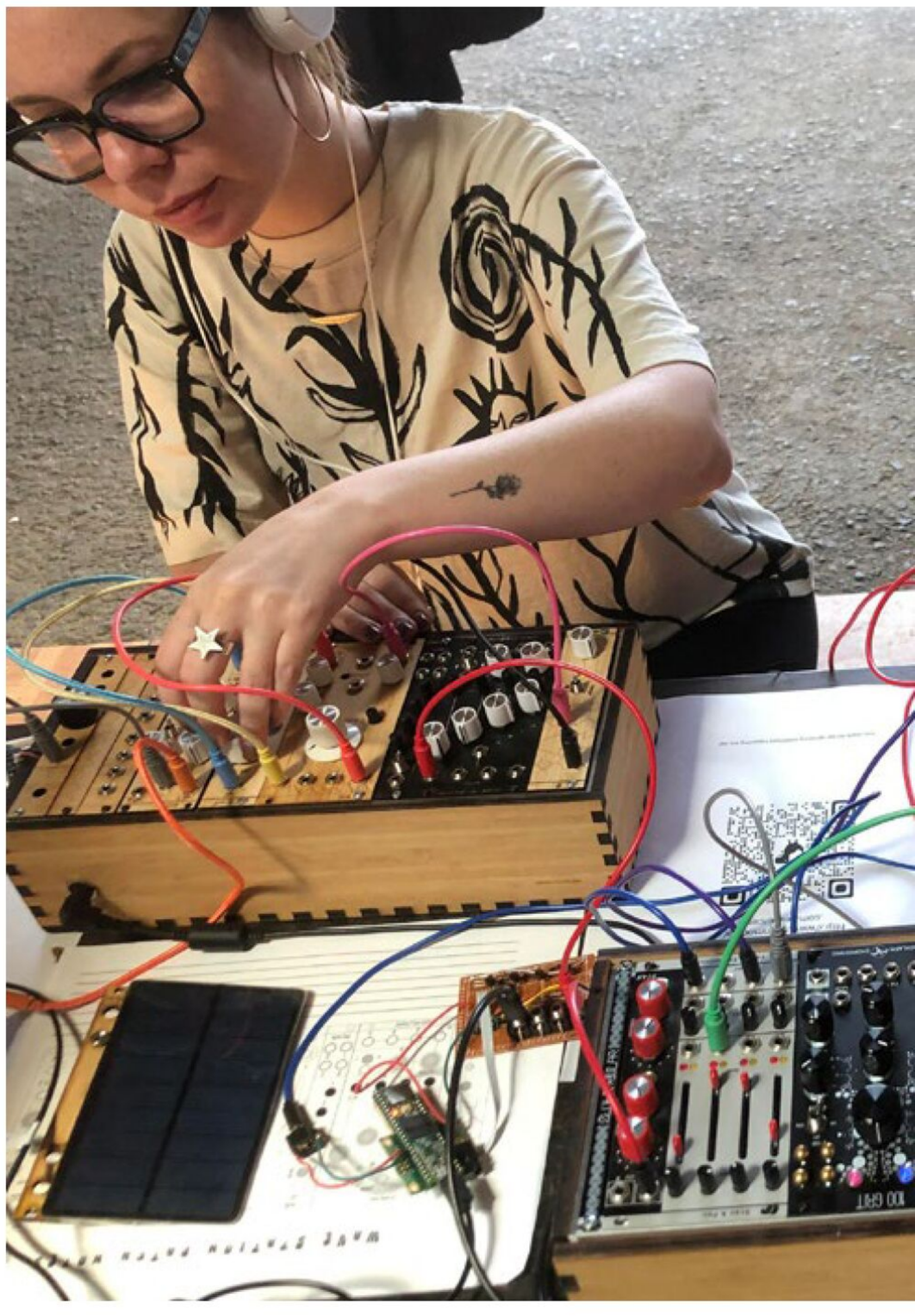
SAINTS AND SYNTHERS

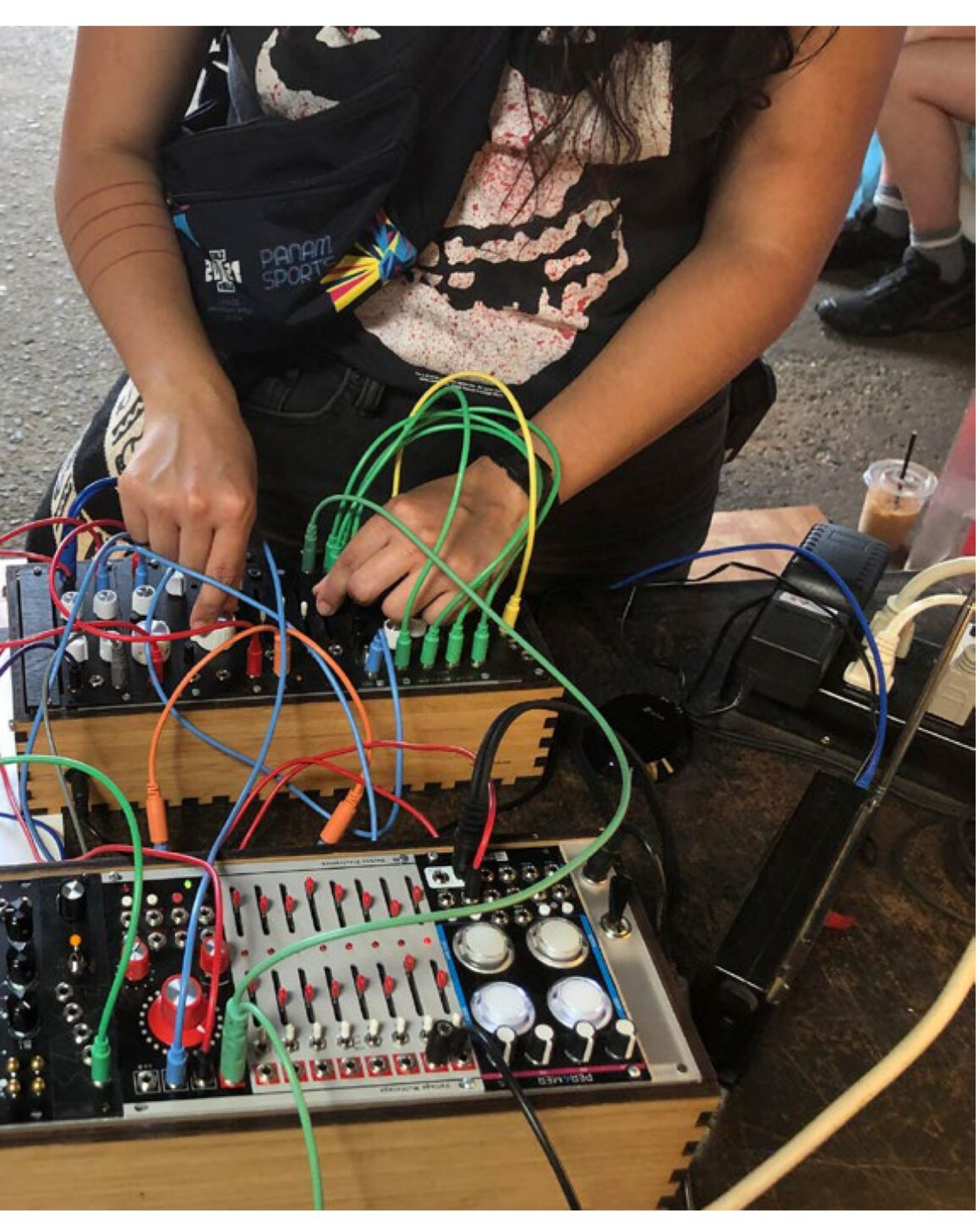
New York’s community library of synthesisers

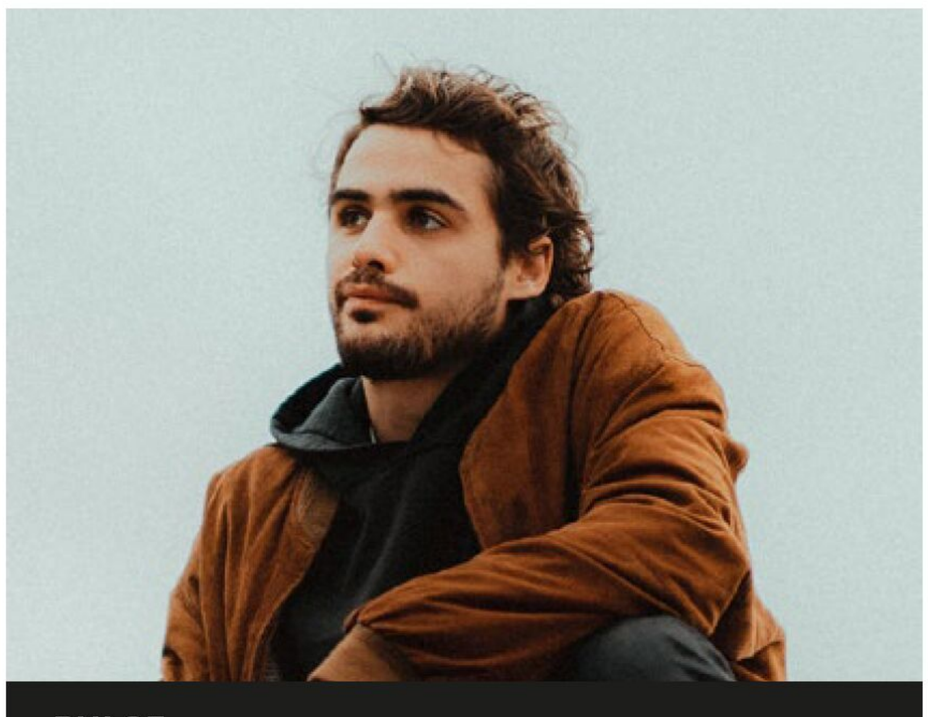
Based in a thriving community space in East Williamsburg, New York, Synth Library is a marvellous membership organisation that’s “committed to making music technology accessible to all”. Founded in 2021 by sound artists Heidi Sabertooth and Cy X, the free-to-join lending library hosts talks, workshops, meet-ups and other events, as well as enabling members to borrow a synth from its inventory – encompassing Moogs to Eurorack modules and beyond – for up to four weeks at a time.

The library even has a shared file server so members can work with one another remotely and exchange ideas, and it’s growing fast, with upwards of 600 subscribers. Head to the website to find out more, give financial support, donate gear or, of course, become a member. You can also sign up to the monthly email newsletter. **synthlibrarynyc.org**









PULSE

LOUIS GIANNAMORE

Drummer turns ambitious field recordist

WHO?

It's hard to believe that French-American musician and composer Louis Giannamore only recently celebrated the release of his debut solo album. Since his days at Boston's prestigious Berklee School of Music, the artist, who's now based in London, cut his teeth as a touring drummer, playing sold-out arenas the world over with Aussie alt-rockers Gang Of Youths and English heavy metal outfit Loathe. He's a dab hand at composing for film too, having scored the feature 'Topper' and surrealist horror short 'Vibrator Girl', which premiered at last year's SXSW in Austin, Texas.

WHY LOUIS GIANNAMORE?

Released in December, Giannamore's debut album 'World Tour!' is a sublime collage of field recordings taken while travelling the world as a musician. Using only an iPhone to diarise the sounds of street performers, sirens, horns, bird calls, wind, waves, thunderstorms, construction sites, crickets, taps, door hinges, bicycles, slot machines and more, it makes for a stunning aural kaleidoscope. "This album is my emotional journey, from glamorous to gruelling, of the extensive year I experienced on tour, reliving those moments through song, made from sounds both near and far," says Giannamore.

TELL US MORE...

Giannamore cites musician and soundscape ecologist Bernie Krause's book 'The Great Animal Orchestra' as a key inspiration. He has squeezed a whopping 400 individual field recordings into 'World Tour!', many of them snapshots of live music in all manner of public settings and guises. But you might be surprised to learn this project was not born out of spontaneity. "I knew at the start of 2022, when I was handed my touring schedule, this was the year to finally bring this idea to life, to capture the world through sound and create structured music through sampling," he says. Here's to more of the same.

WILLIAM STOKES

'World Tour!' is out now via Bandcamp

PARADIGM DRIFT

Epic and mesmeric, sensual and influential, ‘Phaedra’ is Tangerine Dream’s definitive masterpiece. It was recorded under trying circumstances, but the album’s sequenced, otherworldly sounds – built on Mellotron and Moog synths – arguably resonate even more today than they did in 1974. To mark its 50th anniversary this month, we tell the story of an enduring cornerstone of progressive electronic music

WORDS: DAVID STUBBS

TANGERINE DREAM

In November 1973, the members of Tangerine Dream arrived in London on a half-empty BAE flight from Berlin. Their equipment was simultaneously transported by a somewhat ramshackle Daimler truck to Calais by road. The group, then comprising Edgar Froese, Peter Baumann and Christopher Franke – a new form of power trio – had been successfully enticed by Richard Branson to join his fledgling Virgin label.

The three were only too grateful. They were at loggerheads with their previous imprint Ohr, founded by Rolf-Ulrich Kaiser – a mercurial fellow who would ultimately fade away in a haze of his own making because of his attempts to meld all of the bands on Ohr's roster into a shifting collective under the banner of Cosmic Couriers. As well as an understandable desire for autonomy, the straight-edged Froese took a very dim view indeed of the acid-fried dysfunctionality into which the label was descending.

"The founder of the label was a little bit… strange in the brain," says Baumann when we speak. "He went off the deep end. We didn't really feel that the Cosmic Couriers thing was our cup of tea."

Branson, musical director of Virgin, had ventured to West Germany in search of new talent to supplement British acts on his label, which included Gong and a certain Mike Oldfield. There, he would sign the Hamburg-based Faust. German Polydor had previously signed Faust on the promise that they would be the "new Beatles", only for them to turn out to be the very avant-garde antithesis. Consequently, they were dropped and, in 1973, ejected from their Wümme studio compound, they were living on dog food.

Branson had also made an offer to Froese and co to come and record a new album in England. This rescued Froese, who died in 2015 aged 70, from what he described in his autobiography, 'Tangerine Dream – Force Majeure', as an "existential crisis". He paraphrases the menaces he felt TD were being threatened with by Ohr when they took legal action, and the word put about by them to their German music business and press contacts:

"The Berlin group Tangerine Dream will achieve in court precisely what the band means to the German music scene, namely NOTHING."

Here they all were, however, in the UK in 1973, in what represented a rather unnerving culture shock. Peter Baumann remembers the journey he and the group took to The Manor in Oxford, a Tudor house converted into a studio sitting in several hectares of land.

"I remember very well when we arrived – this was in the 1970s when they had the oil crisis. We saw the long lines of cars at the petrol stations."

Keeping the trio company in the car Branson had laid on for them was a rather menacing-looking dog, an Irish wolfhound by the name of Bootleg who, they were assured, only turned violent when he deemed himself to have been provoked. They arrived at the studio, a haven amid the economic gloom of early 70s Britain, under slate-grey skies and driving November rain.

"When we reached The Manor, there was nobody there," recalls Baumann. "We looked around and eventually found the whole gang in a room – all sitting watching TV, everyone completely stoned. And they were wonderful people, but they said, 'We just had some pot brownies for dinner'."

All of this was congenial to the youthful Baumann, much less so to Froese. If Ohr were no longer Tangerine Dream's cup of tea, then The Manor studio was certainly not their cup of coffee – Froese described the coffee in the canteen as tasting like "diluted vegetable stock". The food was abysmal too.

"It was cooked with love but in an unfortunate British way, free from any exotic spices and free from any leanings towards an international cuisine," wrote Froese. "Porridge with soft boiled cauliflower was a particular delight."

Froese chose to view it all as a "karma-style survivable experience". What other choice did he have? He was even less impressed by the state of the studio itself, which he described as "a technical rubbish dump". Faced with Froese's misgivings, the studio engineer assured him that Mike Oldfield had just recorded an album there that had gone very well. "Good for Mike Oldfield," thought Froese, "whoever the hell he is…"

However, this was of little consolation when the initial recordings for the album that would become 'Phaedra' were marred by a power failure, plunging the studio into complete darkness, along with an earache-inducing crackle on a malfunctioning mixing console and a roof leak that saw heavy rain drip into all parts of the studio. The group were on an extremely tight, 14-day time constraint – Gong were booked to come and record immediately after them – but the first two days of their tenure were spent waiting for equipment to be repaired. Little wonder they nicknamed the studio the "crackle ballroom".

The nadir came when Bootleg the Irish wolfhound looked in at the studio, then trotted up to the Mellotron, cocked his leg and pissed into it copiously. Incense sticks had to be fetched to negate the stench of wolfhound urine.

Baumann in particular was sanguine about these developments as, in keeping with the spirit of The Manor, he began every day by "partaking". "A joint in the morning and the day is your friend" was his maxim.

"Everyone there bore a relaxed expression," noted Froese of studio staff and fellow group members alike, feeling that he alone was bearing the burden and stress of recordings which had yet to begin.

Some respite came when a couple of tech whizz-kids known as the Bradley brothers helped Froese change the tapes on his Mellotron. Work could commence, with the three band members working alone and in tandem, attempting to generate ideas completely from scratch. But for whatever reason, they came up short – finding their way around the Moog synth or hitherto practically unknown instruments like the sequencer.

The terrible English weather certainly didn't help either, putting paid to the long walks the band liked to take to clear their heads prior to recording. Instead, they had to make do with congregating on a dilapidated tennis court on the Manor grounds. And then, just as things couldn't possibly get any gloomier, and with just days left of their allocated studio time, Christopher Franke's Moog malfunctioned, susceptible as it was to even small fluctuations in the electricity supply.

Froese and Baumann left Franke alone so that he could re-tune the instrument. As they sat in the kitchen, ruminating over British hot chocolate – the only beverage acceptable to them – on what a shambles these sessions were, an eerie and compelling sequencer loop beamed through from the studio, like a chink of light. This, Froese instantly realised, was a sequence that absolutely had to be recorded. By sheer force of chance, a breakthrough at last…

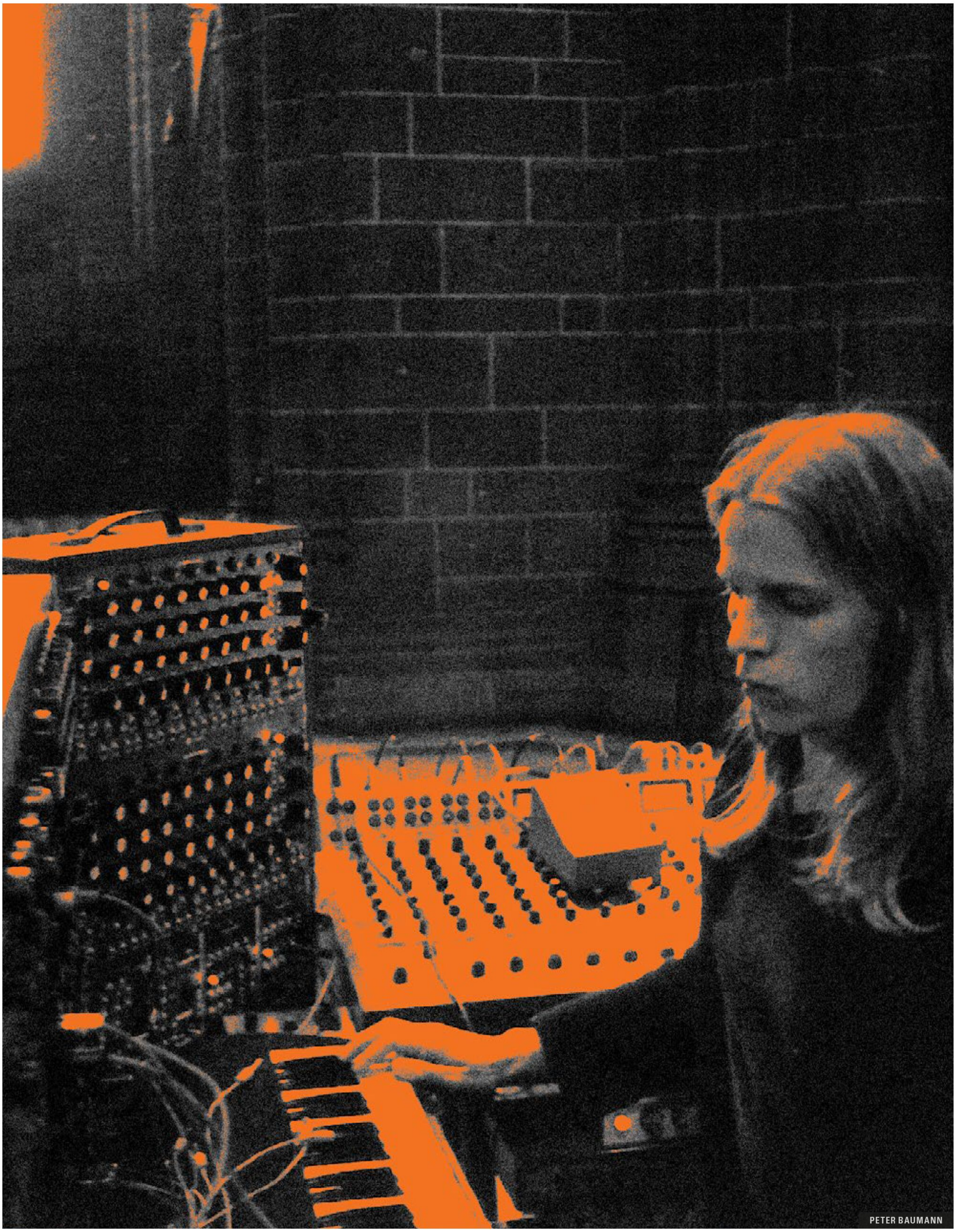
"I ran into the studio and grabbed Franke by both arms so that he couldn't alter any more settings," stated Froese in his autobiography.

Franke was indignant, insisting he could get that sound any time, and the pair practically wrestled in the studio to the amusement of the ever-genial Baumann. But Froese prevailed, the tapes began to roll and the cornerstone of the title track to 'Phaedra' was in place.

"They went into the studio every single day for three weeks and made hours and hours of meandering, directionless and quite honestly not very successful music," says Porcupine Tree's Steven Wilson, who remastered 'Phaedra' in 2019 and had access to the session tapes in their entirety.

"Sometime in the third week, they go in and you can sense it – they're all at their wits' end. And something happens. Genius descends. And they go on to create this masterpiece. If you hear, as I have, all the failed attempts, the run-ups… it makes it even more magical."

TANGERINE DREAM AT THE ZEISS PLANETARIUM, BERLIN



PETER BAUMANN

Edgar Froese started his musical life in the 1960s, in a style typical of many young West German artists, aping the mannerisms and tropes of Anglo-American groups from which they would later radically depart. Tangerine Dream were unabashedly influenced in their foundation by English psychedelia, as evidenced by Froese's pre-TD combo The Ones, who disbanded in 1967 after just one single. In addition, Froese attended closely to early Pink Floyd, while The Beatles' 'Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds' was very much on his radar too.

But Froese experienced a mini-epiphany early on when a group of his were invited to play at Salvador Dalí's villa in the town of Cadaqués, Spain. Proximity to the extravagant, surrealist genius in the midst of his opulence prompted Froese to pursue a more experimental direction, finding ways in which the radical, formalist movements of 20th century art might similarly open up new horizons for the relatively stinted, blinkered beast that was mid-60s beat music.

"Everything is possible in art," the 22-year-old decided, as he embraced the potential of the "absurd", previously considered unimaginable or beyond the pale in Anglo-American rock hegemony. Froese was on the point of taking a decisive, quantum leap.

He was already studying painting and sculpture in Berlin, and so dropped naturally into the cultural scene revolving around the Zodiak Free Arts Lab, located in Hallesches Ufer in West Berlin and co-founded by Conrad Schnitzler, Hans-Joachim Roedelius and Boris Schaak. The Lab only opened late at night after the regular theatre in which it was sited was closed, so that the raucous and anarchic musical performances it hosted would not drown out the theatrical ones.

The Arts Lab was wilfully chaotic – Schnitzler had painted the venue black, including the windows, and bands played simultaneously, competing with the clatter of pinball machines and radios. Drugs were taken. But the Arts Lab was an incubator, not just for avant-garde West German musicians but political groups such as the Umherschweifende Haschrebellen (Rambling Hash Rebels) or agit-pop combos like Ton Steine Scherben.

The late 1960s was a time of both musical and political insurrection, but this had a particular resonance with the young West German generation. Coming of age, the most politicised elements were angrily conscious of the sins of their fathers and grandfathers in the Third Reich, and the silence they exuded about their generation's heinous crimes in the years of post-war "reconstruction". They took solace in the music of forgetting – like Schlager, or the Coca-Cola-ised boons of the occupying Anglo-American culture – with young musicians having to earn their chops, playing everything from The Beatles to Motown for GI troops at weekend parties.

This sense of cultural humiliation may not always have been conscious but it cut deep. It was no coincidence that not just in Berlin, but in Cologne (Can), Düsseldorf (Kraftwerk, Neu!) and Hamburg (Faust), musical collectives were springing up, often resorting to electronics inspired by forefathers like Karlheinz Stockhausen to conceive new music, West German in origin, free of the shackles of Anglo-American rock domination. Despite being a guitarist, Froese always felt there was something inherently absurd about Germans attempting rock.

"We didn't have the attitude for rock 'n' roll, the blues and so on," he told Mojo's Andy Gill in 1997. "What can you do if you are in a position where you can run round in circles and still never catch up with what is already there? That period of time was when Clapton was big with Cream, and Hendrix was big – what did it mean for a German to take a guitar and start playing like that? It was ridiculous."

Baumann concurs with this today.

"The thing is, it's not in the German culture to have rock 'n' roll bands. There are very few. OK, maybe now it is different. Back then, you had the Scorpions but otherwise very, very few. That showmanship you have in the UK and the US, you just didn't have in Germany."

The original Tangerine Dream line-up comprised Froese, Conrad Schnitzler and Klaus Schulze, the latter two very wilful characters who went their very individual ways, against the grain of the generally collective spirit of krautrock. They released their debut album, 'Electronic Meditation', their sole recording as an ensemble, in 1970.

"Electronic" was a slight misnomer as the trio did not at this stage possess electronic equipment – rather, they modified their instruments, used sound effects and tapes, and devices such as a slide calculator called the Addiator to create a chalk and pins outline of a future music, impressive in its vast range despite its lo-fi recording methods. The title of the opening track, 'Genesis', was an appropriate harbinger for Froese's grandiose ambitions.

Schnitzler's involvement in this album also spoke of Froese's anti-rock stance, an outsider-ism which prefigured punk in its ethos, as described by Schnitzler in David Keenan's interview with him for The Wire in 2006.

"I said to Edgar, 'You know I cannot play?'. He said, 'That's good'. This was when Froese and Klaus Schulze were playing together. They played rock music, and I was there to break the rock music, to make it kaput. I did everything against it, putting as much noise in as possible."

"We have maybe been the first electric punks in history in 1970," Froese later commented to American music journalist Jim Sullivan.

The album was released on the Ohr label, with whom the group would develop an ultimately fractious relationship. The follow-up, 'Alpha Centauri', was released in 1971, with a line-up that now included Christopher Franke. Although its dark, billowing aesthetic was still dominated by acoustic instruments such as organ and flute, electronic instruments were coming to bear on the Tangerine Dream sound via a guest appearance by Roland Paulick on synthesiser and a VCS 3 courtesy of Franke.

Froese was now talking openly about "kosmische" music, but this was clearly not the cosmos in a friendly, astrological sense, forming alignments to boost humanity's prospects of having unexpected career opportunities or pleasant surprises in store. This was a universe that was remote, indifferent to humanity, way above and beyond the fallen Earth – not dissimilar to Stockhausen's post-war electronic visions.

"We listened quite a bit to Pink Floyd, but also to Ligeti and Stockhausen," says Baumann.

'Zeit' followed in 1972, the first album to feature a young Baumann, who now downplays the cosmic significance of his early efforts with the group.

"We had no idea what we were doing. We were just a few dudes having fun making weird sounds. There was no real thought behind the direction. That's what we loved to do and that's why we did it."

Nevertheless, whether intuitively or otherwise, Tangerine Dream were taking great shape. Florian Fricke of Popul Vuh contributed to the opening 'Birth Of Liquid Plejades' track, playing Moog synthesiser, an extremely rare and expensive instrument at that time, which he'd only been able to acquire because of his private means.

'Zeit' certainly stood out. The album's terse title alluded to the notion that time as we understand it in our minds is illusory – in fact, time is a static concept. This went against the very idea of "progress" that underpinned most 70s rock. Instead, Tangerine Dream presented a sort of stasis, despite their rejection of repetition. It's like scanning the night skies, in all their remote variegation, a celestial panorama of unrelated activities, ominous in their indifference to humanity. In its beatless, overarching unearthliness, 'Zeit' would prefigure a great deal, including even '(No Pussyfooting)', Brian Eno's 1973 collaboration with Robert Fripp.

'Atem' followed in 1973, the last of what was termed their "Pink" series of albums for Ohr. Dominated by its 20-minute title track, it would see Froese make up for the loss of Fricke's Moog with the acquisition of a Mellotron. Crucially, the album caught the ear of Radio 1 DJ John Peel, who declared 'Atem' one of his albums of the year. His patronage would help clear the way for Tangerine Dream to be introduced to a British listenership.

Fast-forward to November 1974 and, with just a few days of recording time left, Tangerine Dream still had to find 22 minutes of acceptable music.

After completing the track 'Phaedra', next up was the piece that would become 'Mysterious Semblance At The Strand Of Nightmares', which perhaps sums up the sense that Tangerine Dream were pulling inspiration from thin air in the face of desperate circumstances. Credited to Froese alone, the track was triggered by using a box which Froese had purchased in Berlin and brought over to the UK, one that produced phaser and flanger effects absolutely commonplace on any computer in 2023, but which were quite unknown back then.

He had arranged to start the studio session two hours early – despite the proclamation that underpinned 'Zeit' regarding the static nature of time, Froese was concerned that the clock actually was ticking and it was a matter of urgency to get something recorded pronto. Worried as he was about the "mental state" of both Baumann and Franke at this stressful stage, he enlisted the help of his partner Monika to produce what he described as a "musical quickie". He explained to Monika how to use the filter knob on the phaser while he played Mellotron.

When Baumann and Franke arrived at the studio and were presented with this first take, they were not best pleased. Feeling that this modus operandi breached the protocols of the way Tangerine Dream worked, Baumann rather coldly asked if they were still a three-piece, before embarking on a lengthy walk in the woods. Sarah, the Manor cook, informed Froese of Baumann's sojourn and that, Captain Oates-like, he "may be some time".

However, the group then reassembled to produce the track 'Movements Of A Visionary'. And then, later that night, Baumann made another oblique disappearance, stating that he had to run some checks on his instruments. In fact, he had other ideas.

"I did my piece ['Sequent C'] on the very last night," recalls Baumann. "There was a mobile unit in the parking lot, and I was in there with a recorder, recording and mixing it all night long. We needed the material."

Froese described Baumann's complexion as he arrived at the breakfast table the next morning as "the same shade as the grey, chafed flannel of his trousers". Baumann announced that he had produced a track of his own accord, one out of keeping musically with the rest of the album, given the circumstances of its making, but uniquely resonant, nevertheless. Froese suspected the very making of the solo track was a passive-aggressive response to his having recorded 'Mysterious Semblance' alone, but he let it go, content to admire Baumann's hitherto unsuspected prowess on the recorder. The music was in the can.

Richard Branson and Virgin A&R man Simon Draper visited later that day.

"Simon Draper came over and listened to the record and smoked a joint," says Baumann. "He didn't say anything for a few minutes and then he said, 'That's just an amazing piece of music'. And that was the first time we thought, 'Wow, maybe we've got something here'."

Although Branson was the dealmaker at Virgin, the man with an eye for a commercial opportunity, Draper was the far more knowledgeable of the two. Branson had put Draper at the helm of his musical operation, having first met him as a 20-year-old in 1971. Born in South Africa, Draper had been fanatical about music from a young age, even hosting his own radio station in Durban. He specialised in imports, working diligently with Virgin's mail order business prior to the establishment of the label proper. And he would buy up copies of albums by artists like Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart to jump the gun, as in the early 1970s there was still a lag of a few months between their US and UK release.

At a time when rock critics still regarded the idea of German music as inherently comic, unable to resist gratuitous references to sauerkraut, "Achtung!" and headlines like "Ve Haff Vays Of Making You Listen" (and this was just the supposedly ultra-hip and progressive New Musical Express), Draper understood that something serious was going on in West Germany. He had ordered a job lot of albums from Tangerine Dream's Ohr label and marked out Froese and the group as commercially viable.

"Because it was instrumental music, it had international appeal," says Draper. "There was no language barrier. In contrast to the huge problems we had selling French music outside France, for example. Tangerine Dream were international, the lingua franca."

Moreover, via his mail order dealings, Draper was clued up and very conscious of what kind of music was in demand. He'd seen the success of Tonto's Expanding Head Band, the pioneering electronic project of British-American duo Malcolm Cecil and Bob Margouleff, who would help Stevie Wonder produce his superb series of early 70s ARP and Moog-based albums including 'Talking Book' and 'Innervisions'.

In 1974, Edgar Froese spoke of having told a Melody Maker journalist that in 10 years' time, everyone would be using synthesisers, and of the journalist terminating the interview, concluding that Froese had a screw loose. Draper understood that despite such synthphobia, there was a potentially huge audience for electronic music. The success of Tonto's Expanding Head Band persuaded him that Tangerine Dream could enjoy great success too – indeed, for him, it was never in doubt.

"I knew that sort of thing would sell."

But when Virgin set up their record label, they were outsiders.

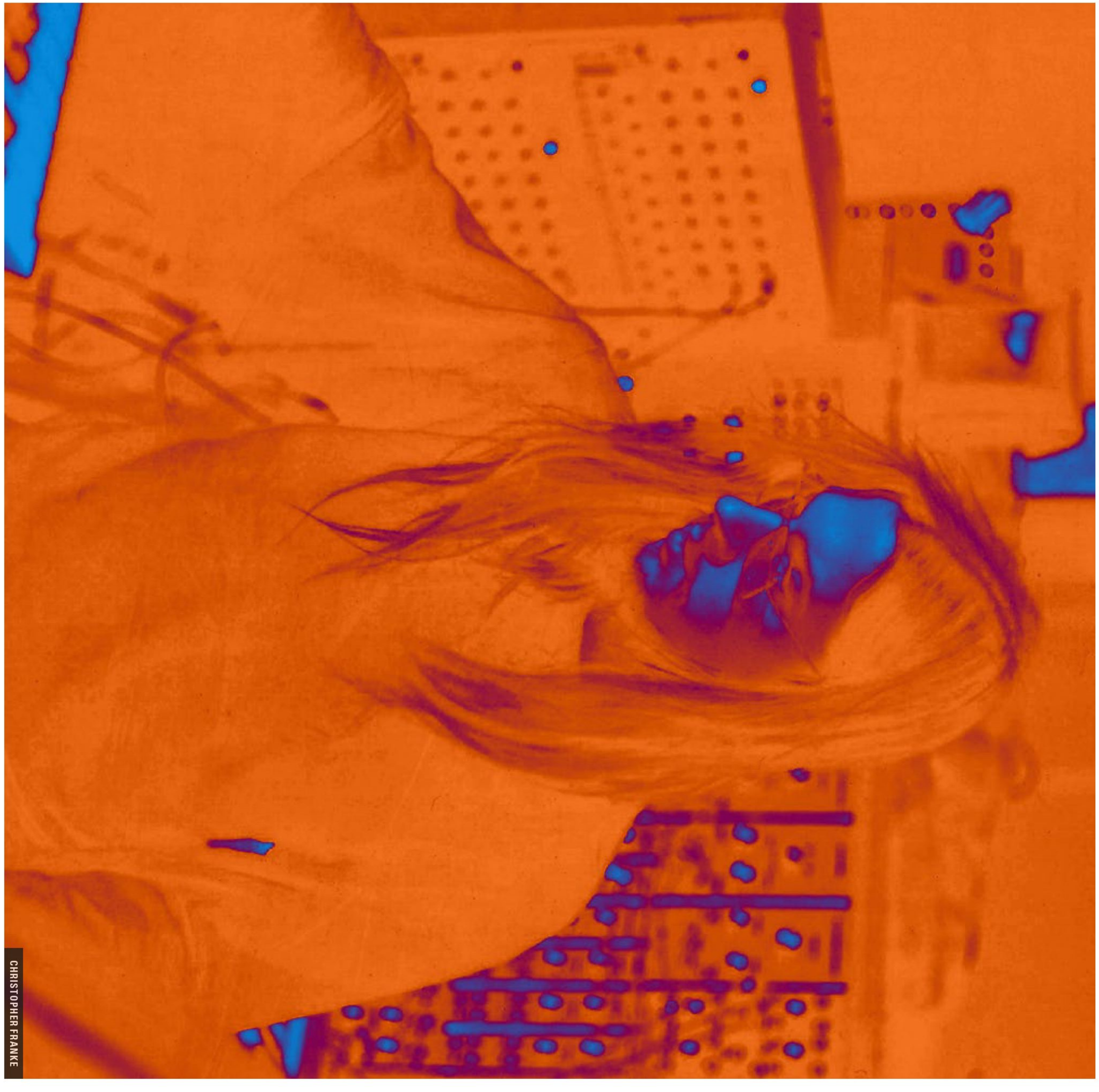
"It wasn't possible for us to sign mainstream acts," admits Draper. "Even people like Zappa and Beefheart were in America and completely unavailable. We tried to sign Cockney Rebel early on but were beaten hands down by EMI."

However, coupled with the doyens of the "Canterbury scene", Virgin founded their reputation on looking to Europe. They signed Faust, then Tangerine Dream – a far more commercially viable project.

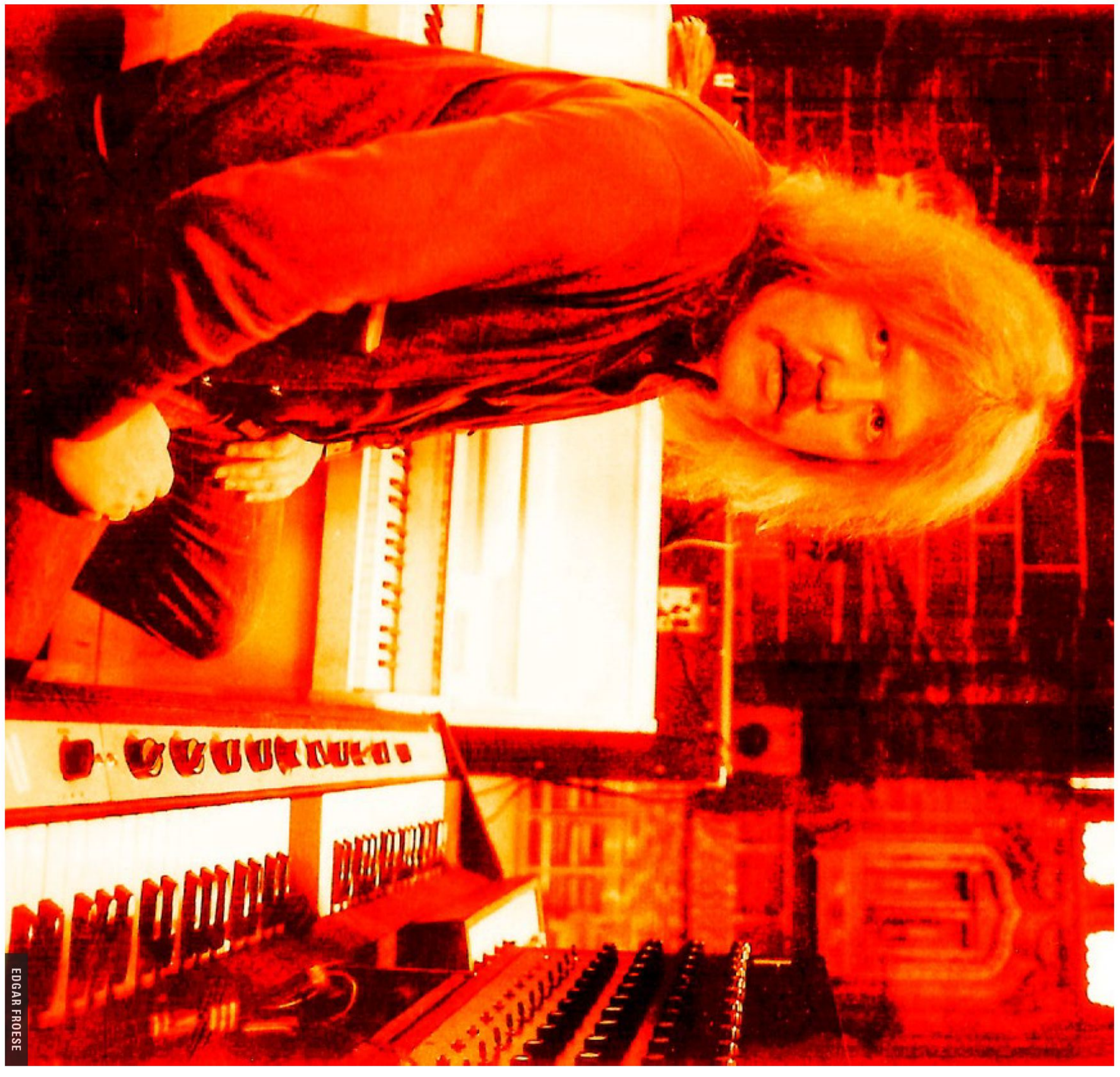
"What really set Virgin apart from our rivals like Chrysalis and Island was that they weren't so European-orientated," continues Draper. "We were sustained by electronic and avant-garde music."

He "vaguely" remembers his first playback of 'Phaedra', as recounted by Baumann and Froese.

"I did like 'Phaedra' a lot. The thing was, it was rhythmic. It was very atmospheric, very powerful and we knew it would sell, which is a huge plus. And it sold. 'Phaedra' went gold."



CHRISTOPHER FRANKE


EDGAR FROESE

So, for all the stress and jeopardy that went into its making, what was the end product? How did 'Phaedra' resonate then – and today?

"The common idea was to start very, very simple – one tone or pad," says Baumann now of the group's working method. "We started every concert like that, it was our signature. Instead of starting with a bang, start with the opposite – extreme simplicity – and see how it develops. When you improvise, someone throws something out, someone else responds. And no one knows what the outcome will be."

'Phaedra' does indeed begin relatively simply, with a single tone falling like a meteor from a starless sky, twisting, silvery, reverberant. And then the sequencer stirring, within a few years an instrument whose ubiquity stretched to TV adverts, but which in 1974 was entirely novel, like nothing else – fresh metal from beyond Earth, an addition to rock's periodic table, putt-putting into view like a UFO. The Moog sounds waver tantalisingly, an accident incorporated into the piece as if in praise of serendipity, while Gothic Mellotron adds to the instrumental chorus, weathered and ancient, as if having travelled light years to get here.

"It's not a hi-fi recording," says Steven Wilson. "And I think that's why it has that fuzzy, hazy feel. Like when people talk about hauntology and things like Boards Of Canada, that slightly lo-fi, queasy thing, that sense of roughness and decay – it's not hi-fi. The Mellotron is that by definition… this Heath Robinson contraption, these rusty tape loops, never completely in tune. All those hums, that hiss – you could consider it the first 'hauntological' recording. There was just an extraordinary sense of otherness about it that blew me away. It sounded so alien, like it belonged to a different century.

"When I heard the tapes, I was astonished to discover that this was essentially three people creating a mono sound – the multitrack tape has three channels on most of it, and each musician had a mono feed. So this idea of stereophonic sound – it's a complete antithesis, in a way. It's very lo-fi, very primitive. Every time they turned on the synthesiser they had to create their sound from scratch. And if the cleaning lady came in during the night and moved the knobs they were back to square one again."

The mood shifts on the Froese composition 'Mysterious Semblance At The Strand Of Nightmares' as synths sweep diaphanously across a seascape, its classical meandering reflecting Froese's belief that there was little to commend modern music, even among his own West German peers, and that only classical music truly reached the aesthetic heights of which he dreamed. Oceans boil over below – there's a sense of space, of grandeur confected out of nothing.

On 'Movements Of A Visionary', the velocity of the sequencer goes up a notch, charting electronic territories hitherto unexplored, leaving spatial detritus floating in its wing mirrors. Organ-like phrases are a reminder of the ancient as well as the future, a music which somehow exists outside of rock altogether, channelled from a different dimension. Finally, 'Sequent C', Peter Baumann's heavily processed recorder piece, takes you to a new space altogether, another mode, belying the taxing circumstances in which it was made.

'Phaedra' has been described as a precursor to dark ambient, though Froese deplored the idea of Tangerine Dream being regarded as background music. He demanded that it be focused on and attended to, undividedly.

"We are definitely not new age," Froese told NME's Simon Witter in 1990. "Although some of our music sounds similar to what is now called new age, it hit people in a way that made them active internally, it made them react and feel and think about their emotions. New age today is the exact opposite – it puts people directly to sleep. Our music was never for one second meant to make people drowsy or turn them away from reality."

'Phaedra' sounds like nothing else and retains its sense of strange dissimilitude, precisely because it finds Tangerine Dream working on the threshold of new instrumentation.

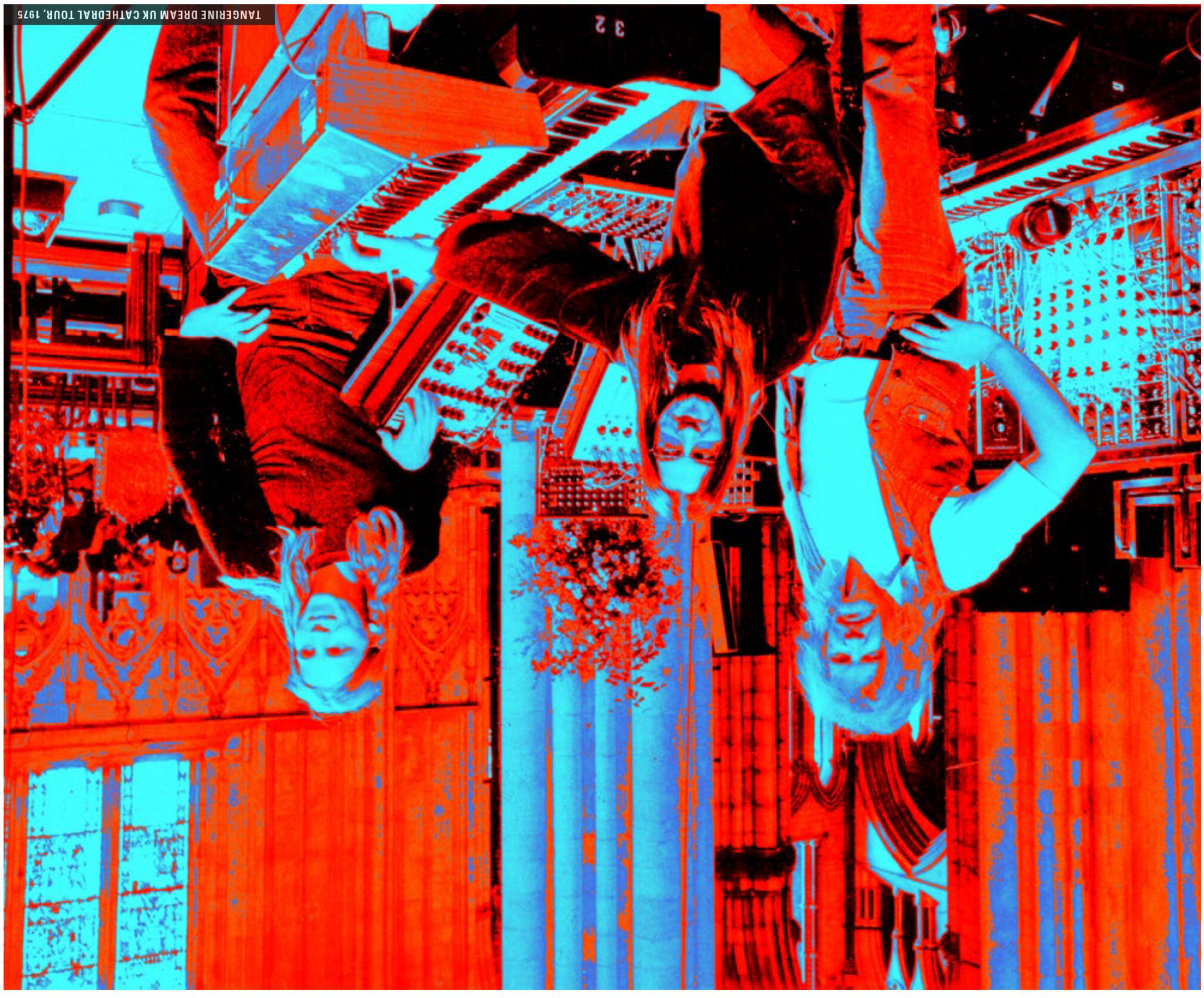
"People were responding to new technologies and didn't know the rules, the prescribed ways you were supposed to use things," says Steven Wilson. "No one knew how to use the Mellotron. And that's what is missing from a lot of 21st century music – that sense of not knowing the rules."

To the group's astonishment, the album was an instant but completely unexpected success.

"I was with my girlfriend travelling in Italy," recalls Baumann of the weeks following the release of 'Phaedra'. "Suddenly there was a telegram from Richard Branson – that was the fastest means of communication. It said, 'You've got to come to London immediately, your record is in the Top 10'. And I remember, I read that and thought, 'What Top 10?'. We'd never been in any kind of chart, certainly not the Melody Maker one."

How does Baumann account retrospectively for the success of 'Phaedra'?

"Well, quite frankly, I think it was luck – the circumstances just coming together to make up the best possible scenario. Christopher getting his Moog synth, getting away from the previous record label, Richard travelling to West Germany to sign us… a lot of luck involved. But most of all, it was the timing. The mood and the environment were right, and the sounds we created were absolutely unique. The constellation of Edgar, Christopher and me was great. None of us were musical geniuses, but we had a great sense of how the three of us combined could come up with something coherent and unique."


TANGERINE DREAM UK CATHEDRAL TOUR, 1975

Following the success of 'Phaedra', Tangerine Dream would have further dealings during the Virgin years as they made successive renegotiations of their contract.

"Richard is a crazy guy, as you know," says Baumann. "He's very likeable – a huge amount of energy. He just can't sit still and jumps all over the place, making phone calls, sorting contracts, having a conversation at the same time. But you can't sit down and have an in-depth conversation with him. He always had to come up with a new joke.

"We were once in Virgin's offices discussing an extension of our contract. We set out our demands and suddenly he jumped out of the office window – a first floor office window. And then he came back up the stairs, wearing these pretend bandages and walking with a crutch, like he was badly injured. He would pull stuff like that all the time."

Edgar Froese's assessment of Branson, on the other hand, was somewhat sidelong and skeptical.

"It was an obvious fact that Branson wasn't able to understand our music," stated Froese in his autobiography. "He simply found it hip and thrilling if others reacted positively and enthusiastically, and he knew that this form of acceptance would be positively reflected in his bank balance."

In the wake of the huge success of 'Phaedra', Tangerine Dream undertook a series of concerts, many of them in cathedrals, including a performance at Coventry Cathedral, which had been bombed 40 years earlier by the Germans – an irony that did not pass Froese by as they returned to the city armed merely with synthesisers. They were in some respects an anti-spectacle, playing with their backs to the audience.

"We had no fancy lights, we didn't jump around onstage," says Baumann, reflecting on it all. "With us, it was never personalised. No one really knew what Edgar, Christopher or I were doing. Music was at the centre of what we did, never us as individuals."

However, there was something monumental about them – the combination of their cavernous sound, their often-ecclesiastical surroundings, banks of equipment and later, their light show.

'Phaedra' represented a zenith for Tangerine Dream, but some thought the group went into a gradual musical decline afterwards, as their use of electronics became more accomplished and therefore more conventional, an effect compounded by Froese increasingly using his guitar, dismaying fans like Steven Wilson – and ultimately making Simon Draper's job rather more difficult.

"They found it easy to make music – our problem was trying to edit them and discouraging them from making so *much* music," says Draper. "They were trying to produce two albums a year, but it got to a point where we thought it was better to release less work so that people were left waiting. There was too much material, especially with their solo albums… it was bad for their career."

Still, 50 years on, 'Phaedra' continues to radiate. A vision of an absolutely new music, made in distinctly fraught circumstances under testing creative and technological conditions – a real sense of jeopardy, trial and error, and discovery – 'Phaedra' still circles the globe, a spectacle to behold, unrusted and undimmed.

For more, visit tangerinedreammusic.com

TANGERINE DREAM, 2023

DREAM TICKET

Post-Edgar Froese, Tangerine Dream have continued to evolve. Reinvented and revitalised with a contemporary line-up, they are fully embracing the 21st century

WORDS: JEREMY ALLEN
PICTURES: MELANIE REINISCH

The invitation to enter the London Palladium via the stage door elicits a surprising tingle of excitement. For people of a certain age growing up in Britain, the Palladium was the nexus of light entertainment, bringing vaudevillian music, comedy and dance into homes across the land back when there were only three television channels to choose from. The Edwardian theatre on Argyll Street is an institution of such import that the late, great host Bruce Forsyth had his ashes interred under the floorboards of the stage.

Inside, the walls are adorned with pictures of entertainment legends – Dean Martin, Debbie Reynolds, Sammy Davis Jr among many others. When the lights go down and the audience departs, you can almost imagine their ghosts dancing along the corridors of the Grade II listed building.

Downstairs, where the dressing rooms are, the smoke and mirrors of showbiz are nowhere to be seen, just the glare of the strip lighting bouncing off the white walls. I'm waiting for Tangerine Dream – on their 'From Virgin To Quantum Years' tour – who carry their own ghosts with them. Sitting in a monobloc red chair ahead of the show, I'm pleased to report that they have tangerines on their rider, or at least mandarins of some description.

I've been shown into the dressing room of the Tangs' band leader Thorsten Quaeschning, where his two bandmates await me. I take a seat on a sofa next to the newest recruit, Paul Frick, whose time briefly overlapped with Ulrich Schnauss. Frick holds the distinction of being the first and so far only member of Tangerine Dream not to have met the band's founder Edgar Froese.

Across from us, seated at a glass table, is violinist Hoshiko Yamane, who has been an integral member of the group since 2011. Yamane chats with me briefly about playing in Falmouth the night before, and the arduous journey from Cornwall to London, though once the interview starts, she prefers to observe and listen to the other members.

The current tour has been Tangerine Dream's most extensive in a career dating all the way back to 1967. Froese was in the rock group The Ones back then, and having just played at Salvador Dalí's mansion in Portlligat, Spain, he felt the hand of destiny on his shoulder. His hero Dalí is important to the story, though the career of the group more resembles that of Dalí's contemporary and compatriot Pablo Picasso, with its various phases and stylistic shifts.

"We started this leg of the tour a month ago," says Frick, who also plays in the Berlin electroacoustic ensemble Brandt Brauer Frick. "We travelled the whole of North America by bus, which was probably more than 10,000 kilometres, and had a very uncomfortable time. Then we had a very comfortable German tour, and now we're here – it's been great fun so far."

I wonder what playing at the London Palladium means to this iteration of Tangerine Dream? Have they ever been here before? At this point, Thorsten Quaeschning joins us, an imposing figure in a black suit and with long flowing hair. Quaeschning has been with the band for 20 years, officially joining in 2005 and becoming musical director after Edgar Froese's death in 2015. Under the guidance of Quaeschning and TD's manager Bianca Froese-Acquaye – Froese's widow – the band has enjoyed something of a renaissance.

While the others look nonplussed regarding my questions about the venue, Quaeschning has done his homework. I mention Brucie's ashes and more pertinently, Beatlemania, which emanated in 1963 from the very stage TD are about to play (the screaming was so intense that the Daily Mirror's showbiz editor Don Short coined the term in a piece published the following day).

"It was 13 October," Quaeschning informs me, without skipping a beat. "So it's 60 years and roughly four-and-a-half weeks ago."

In a strange twist of fate, The Beatles are back at the top of the UK charts when we speak. Their track, 'Now And Then', was made possible thanks to AI isolating the voice of John Lennon from a poor recording dominated by his piano – a trick of technology that wouldn't have been thinkable even a few years ago. I wonder if music made with deceased artists is likely to become more common in the future?

"I listened to that song 20 times the first day it was released because it's just irresistible," says Frick, enthusiastically. "They did a great job. Nothing changes the story of The Beatles, but why shouldn't they take what's there and add to it? I was actually really happy about it."

Quaeschning doesn't see the similarities with what Tangerine Dream have been doing on latter-day studio albums such as 'Quantum Gate' (2017) and 'Raum' (2022).

"The difference is that we were left with a lot of arrangements and hard discs," he says, referring to the bounty of stems of unreleased music Edgar Froese bequeathed to the band to continue TD's legacy after he departed. "There are sketches that are unused and melodies or chord structures that were never released before. So they're meant to be released after, and there was no need to separate tracks."

PAUL FRICK, HOSHIKO YAMANE, THORSTEN QUAESCHNING

The show includes a healthy representation of tracks from 'Raum', which might well be the finest Tangerine Dream album in 35 years. Old classics like 'Phaedra', 'Betrayal (Sorcerer Theme)' – from the movie 'Sorcerer' – and 'Love On A Real Train' (from 'Risky Business') also pepper the set, though why stop there? How about mining some primordial TD from the early albums, featuring the free-form drumming of Klaus Schulze?

"The music before 'Phaedra' was never meant to be reproduced onstage, not even by the composers," explains Quaeschning. "So if you have 'Atem' or 'Electronic Meditation' or 'Alpha Centauri' especially, they only played them once in a recording studio. It makes more sense to start with the sequencer, and 'Phaedra' was the first sequencer album."

Released in 1974, 'Phaedra' – the band's first record for Virgin – had a seismic influence on electronic music with its sequenced phases. So much popular music has been built on these driving, repetitive, squelching and hypnotic rhythms, and cinema was not immune, either. Vangelis might have opened the floodgates for directors requiring glacial synth scores, but it was Tangerine Dream who pioneered that aesthetic by providing the soundtrack to William Friedkin's 1977 adventure-thriller, 'Sorcerer'.

Quaeschning is wary of overstating his group's importance to cinema, citing Oskar Sala's experimental electronic soundtrack for 1963's 'The Birds', though the proliferation of ambient sequenced music certainly begins with Tangerine Dream.

The first album Quaeschning played keyboards on was 2006's 'Paradiso', the final part of the 'La Divina Commedia' trilogy with orchestra and operatic vocals, although he'd also engineered and mixed the previous instalment 'Purgatorio' in 2004. To say it divided fans would be an understatement.

"It was the first project I was involved in," remembers Quaeschning. "So the old saying 'you can't please everyone' was very apt in that case."

Tangerine Dream have now released so many records over the years that nobody seems entirely sure how many there are. Live and studio albums certainly exceed 100, and that's even before we start counting up the soundtracks, of which there are 36 – soon to be 37 – according to Quaeschning. How much of it has he actually heard?

"I've been doing this for 20 years – I would say that I've heard most of it," he confirms.

Frick, the newest member, is still catching up.

"I guess the majority, but definitely not all of it. And every once in a while, when we're not on tour, I discover Tangerine Dream albums that I wasn't really aware of."

The 'Dante Trilogy' – originally released by TD between 2002 and 2005, and reissued as the multi-disc 'La Divina Commedia' in 2022 – at times feels as eternally punishing as the poet's 'Inferno' itself. Though Froese pursued that project doggedly, it failed to resonate beyond a fraction of the fanbase. In the decades since then, however, Tangerine Dream have come full circle, becoming more relevant than they've been since their 1970s heyday, thanks to canny inclusions on hit TV series and video games.

First up was the 36-hour cinematic score, 'The Music Of Grand Theft Auto V', in 2013. Then 'Exit', from their 1981 album of the same name, was used in a 2016 episode of 'Stranger Things' (they've also covered the show's TD-like theme with a knowing wink), and 'Phaedra' became intertwined in the pioneering and mind-bending 'Black Mirror: Bandersnatch' film from 2018.

Whisper it, but Tangerine Dream are quietly hip again. That's certainly reflected in the changing demographic of their audience.

"In the US, we sometimes have a really young audience, which is very cool, though it depends on the countries we're playing," says Frick. "Also, electronic and ambient music has had a huge renaissance over the last 10 years, and there are so many young artists working now with modular synths. So that might actually be pretty good for Tangerine Dream, because they're checking out which bands started to use sequencers and modular synths in pop music – if you want to call it that."

"Pop music", as Frick understands, might be understating it. Tangerine Dream's endlessly shifting, ever-evolving musical wanderings since 'Phaedra' make them less of a band, more a language. It's one of the reasons they're able to continue convincingly, irrespective of who might be in charge. Their latest phase is not called 'The Quantum Years' for nothing, but what was the impetus for the name?

Quaeschning goes into a fair bit of detail that comes out sounding like the Dirac equation, though the last part definitely makes sense.

"The idea of involving quantum theory is so that everything is connected," he states. "The audience is connected to the idea of the performance, and the venue itself has a resonant point. If you break it down then everything is synced to everything else, like the idea of quantum physics."

Onstage, Tangerine Dream essentially play "sessions", mostly enhancing structures that are already in place. But whatever you do, don't describe it as improvisation, which Quaeschning says implies noodling.

"Edgar was very strict about scales," he confirms. "He was probably not always very detailed about what he wanted, but he was very clear about what he didn't want."

Given that Frick never got to meet the legendary Froese, how has it been for him? Was there any trepidation joining Tangerine Dream?

"I remember when I was first invited along, I was quite shy making music and just wanted to add a few bits here and there," he says. "I didn't feel like I should allow myself to change too much. I was intimidated.

"But then it has become the story of making music together with these two wonderful musicians, and how we've bonded. It's a huge privilege that I get to play these awesome shows, like tonight, and then meet so many people who tell me about their experiences at concerts all the way back to the 1970s. I was a fan, but I didn't know the band that well – a few albums, maybe – so now I've got sucked in closer and closer to that cosmos.

"Most people knew Edgar very well," Frick concludes. "I've heard so much about him that it feels sometimes like I met him. Obviously, Edgar's not there anymore. I'd be curious whether he thinks it's OK to have me in the band or not, but I will never know."

Tangerine Dream's 'The Sessions VIII' EP is out now on Eastgate. The 'From Virgin To Quantum Years' tour continues throughout Europe from 11 March

NOTHING IS REAL

PHOTO: PHILIPP RATHMER

Karl Bartos discusses his soundtrack for the expressionist shocker ‘The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari’, a film set in the 19th century, first released in 1920, and now reissued more than 100 years later

WORDS: MARK ROLAND

In the 11 years since Karl Bartos released his last solo album, ‘Off The Record’, the former Kraftwerker has been occupied with two time-consuming projects – his chunky autobiography, ‘Sound Of The Machine: My Life In Kraftwerk And Beyond’, and composing a new soundtrack for a revamped version of what is considered the quintessential work of German expressionist cinema, the 104-year-old ‘The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari’, both of which are being released this month.

The film is a psychological horror story which takes place in a hallucinogenic world of distorted images, featuring a perspective-wrecking set design filled with absurdly outsized furniture, fixtures and fittings, and even more peculiar characters. The protagonist is Francis, who finds himself drawn into the bizarre world of the mysterious hypnotist and funfair showman Dr Caligari and his captive somnambulist Cesare, as he investigates the murder of his friend Alan. It’s quite the shocker.

With its themes of madness and homicide and the utterly disorienting visual style, not to mention its profound weirdness and sheer age, ‘The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari’ is not exactly a staple of the Netflix era, but it looms large in the history of global cinema. Its place in German culture is particularly significant, an example of just how sophisticated cinema in the Weimar period had become before Hitler and his thuggish philistines destroyed German art. In an interview that Karl gave to a German newspaper about the project, ‘Caligari’ was described as “the Big Bang of pop culture”.

“It’s very important for our German nation,” explains Karl. “Just before the First World War, there was the beginning of this new medium. One film which was very popular was ‘The Student Of Prague’. It’s a very clever work, where a character steps out of a mirror. People were just captivated and hypnotised by it. The two writers of ‘The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari’ both saw it.

“Then the First World War came along. This was the starting point of where everything went wrong – this very bad, dark development in Germany. Both writers went to war and came back traumatised. They wanted to go into the film industry, and so came up with the idea for ‘The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari’.”

The two writers, Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer, met in Berlin after the war and initially developed the project with Fritz Lang, who would later direct ‘Metropolis’ in 1927. In the end, it was directed by Robert Wiene, who wrote and directed dozens of films in Germany until his death in 1938. Through the characters of Caligari and Cesare, Janowitz and Mayer explored ideas of authoritarianism and control, using trance and sleepwalking as metaphors for how nations, especially their own, could be urged to kill by deranged leaders. It makes for chilling viewing in the light of what was to come next for the traumatised German nation.

Fifty years later, in the iconic Düsseldorf electronic music studio they called Kling Klang, ‘The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari’ became a touchstone for the members of Kraftwerk – and especially Karl Bartos – as the band sought out inspiration for their recasting of contemporary German culture in the mid-1970s.

It wouldn’t have been lost on Karl and his colleagues that they were working in the very same city that in 1937 had hosted Josef Goebbels’ and Adolf Ziegler’s Degenerate Art exhibition – a selection of modern artworks taken from the many thousands confiscated by the fascist regime for being “an insult to German feeling”. And if ever there was a piece the Nazis would deem degenerate, it was ‘The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari’. It’s outrageously inventive visual style, reflecting the distortions of the disturbed minds of its protagonists and the themes of obsession, control and murder, were both repulsive and far too close to home for the stunted Nazi mind.

For Karl, ‘The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari’ first came into his orbit when Kraftwerk were working on the track ‘Metropolis’.

“It was 1977, before we had written ‘The Man-Machine’,” he says. “I hadn’t seen ‘Metropolis’, but we saw photos and we knew the storyline that a professor builds a robot and gives it the face of Maria, and that it was about the fight between man and machine. This is where the title ‘The Man-Machine’ comes from.”

Ever the intellectual and cultured young men, Kraftwerk’s interest in ‘Metropolis’ led to Karl reading more widely around Weimar cinema.

"There was one line I always remembered regarding 'Caligari'," he says. "'The new medium, film, combines the expressionist's world view with psychoanalysis and the mystical ghost world of romanticism.' And that was the door through which I got into the 'Caligari' world."

Today, if we want to check out some old piece of cinematic history, the chances are it will either be on a streaming service somewhere or on YouTube. But in those far-off days before the advent of the internet, you had to wait for your local arthouse cinema to show it or for it to pop up on TV. Neither of which was likely with a silent motion picture from 1920, when prints were often lost or damaged.

And so 'The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari' was a work with a huge cultural footprint, extensively written about by academics and film historians, but one that few people had ever actually seen. Its scarcity only intensified Karl's interest in it, which he describes as an addiction.

"I approached it through books and pictures. It took a long time before I saw it – not until 2005. But the idea of putting this project together had been growing for a long time. I must confess that I didn't understand the movie so well. I got a VHS copy of it, and it was very dark and bad quality. But I was able to put the film in the computer and improvise to it."

He learned more about it from media professors when he was teaching at Berlin University of the Arts between 2004 and 2009, where he co-founded and taught a course called Sound Studies – Acoustic Communication. In 2014, 'Caligari' was restored by the Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Foundation, which finally gave Karl the most complete and clean version of the film to work with, and a reason to rescore it.

The new soundtrack isn't just a series of music cues. It's alive with sound design – muffled voices, footsteps, party blowers, the sounds of the crowds bustling around the funfair. And the score itself has a narrative of its own. Like the classical tradition which underpins Karl's work, thanks to his years of formal training at the Robert Schumann Hochschule in Düsseldorf, the choice of instrumentation and the musical themes support and emphasise the story unfolding on the screen in front of your eyes.

"I was sneaking into Francis' mind," says Karl. "The guy who tells the story is mentally disturbed. I had to come up with a sound which yields to it, but on the other hand I wanted to draw people into the middle of the movie. I wanted to take them by the hand and put them in the situation. Let me take you down, because I'm going to… Caligari's world. This strange world where nothing is real."

Karl making reference to The Beatles' 'Strawberry Fields Forever' here isn't accidental – he's a big Beatles fan. The opening chord of 'A Hard Day's Night' back in 1964 was the starting pistol which set him off on his musical life. At times, his compositions for 'The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari' take on the trippy hues of 'Being For The Benefit Of Mr Kite', from the 'Sgt Pepper' album. It's the ideal sound for the psychedelic funfair scenes, where milling crowds of revellers give money to a monkey before entering the hallucinatory world of the fair and its freakish sideshows.

Anyone who has endured Giorgio Moroder's 1984 soundtrack to Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis', the other legendary movie of the Weimar era, might balk at the idea of a pop music score for 'The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari'. And Karl did reject his first forays, where he started creating what he calls "pop music" for the film.

"Like my former band, perhaps…" he says.

As enticing as that sounds, it didn't suit for a work spanning the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries.

"I knew I had to find a sound that would be able to combine all of the periods of time," notes Karl. "I was thinking about a symphony orchestra, but I knew it needed to be a transformed symphony orchestra, a bit like what Wendy Carlos did with 'A Clockwork Orange'. So with this, it is sort of like a symphonic orchestra, but transformed, twisted."

As Karl told me when we discussed his autobiography in 2022, "I always like to go back into the history of music, take a little bit from here and there, and I go back to the time when Bach lived, the age of enlightenment…"

The most critical device he's employed to achieve what he was looking for is the jarring swirl of obviously synthetic strings. They unapologetically drive the main theme, interspersed with Gothic organ. It's a haunting and unforgettable opening, and not a million miles from Kraftwerk's canny use of shonky sounds, like the Vako Orchestron they employed for choir and strings on both 'Radio-Activity' and 'Trans-Europe Express'.

The sounds Karl uses for 'The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari' evoke classical music and modernity, but at the same time create a queasiness in the listener, setting us up for what is a whole hour in the company of a madman, raving with serious serial-killer energy.

"You see the Polymoog over there?" he says, indicating the legendary polyphonic beast behind him. "That plays a big role. It's all in there. I used the Akai sample library, the Vienna library. It's all wrapped into one. It's the *idea* of an orchestra. There are 18 musicians playing, and they are having a conversation. One instrument talks to another instrument, and a third instrument gives a comment, and the percussion plays an accent. Boom! But in the end, everyone is speaking with one voice, and this is the concept behind my twisted symphonic orchestra."

It is brilliantly executed. You can never be quite sure of where the artificial ends and the authentic begins. Suspenseful minor key arpeggios in the first scenes set up the story, then synthesisers breathe ghostly and airy textures, raising tension, while Caligari hawking his sideshow is accompanied by frankly gruesome melodies composed in an odd time signature which serves to destabilise the viewer.

Leitmotifs, like the almost comical tootling, soundtrack Dr Caligari's scheming and gurning, which turn darker and increasingly unsettling as the story unfolds. By contrast, a gentle, romantic piano theme underpins the scene where we are introduced to Jane, the mutual love interest of Alan and Francis. The sound design, which punctuates throughout, brings the film into a three-dimensional world. These snatches of diegetic sound were also inspired by Karl's reading about the making of the movie.

"It was filmed in the winter of 1919-20 in Berlin, of course," he says. "They had built a big glass house, because they needed daylight, illumination everywhere. And so they acted in this huge glass house and there was lots of noise going on. Everybody knew about the recording of sound, but they couldn't manage to put the soundtrack on the celluloid.

"So it was just a very strange situation. The actors were acting, they're speaking all the time. And you can read the actors' lips, but the technology wasn't ready yet to synchronise recorded sound with pictures. So I thought, 'What would happen if I reconstruct all the sounds?'. It was a nightmare because it took me so long. Every footstep you hear, every heartbeat, almost!"

Along with footsteps and the like, there are voices in the soundtrack – snippets of sentences appear as impressions of human speech rather than anything fully comprehensible. It makes for a vividly dreamlike experience.

"If I dream, what sounds do I hear?" says Karl. "Do I really hear people speaking? I imagined it as a kind of telepathy."

Having survived for over 100 years, 'The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari' remains the ultimate work of celluloid expressionism, and was a major influence for film noir and Gothic horror. And it wasn't just Kraftwerk who were inspired by it years after its creation.

Killing Joke frontman Jaz Coleman, terrifying audiences in 1980 with his ghoulish make-up and manic persona, was a dead ringer for the tragic figure of Cesare, the death-predicting somnambulist. The outfit that Bowie wore for a shoot with photographer Steve Schapiro in 1975 was inspired by Cesare's, and he revisited it in the video for 2015's 'Lazarus' – the last single released before his death – where he emerges from and returns to a wardrobe, just as Cesare does with his cabinet.

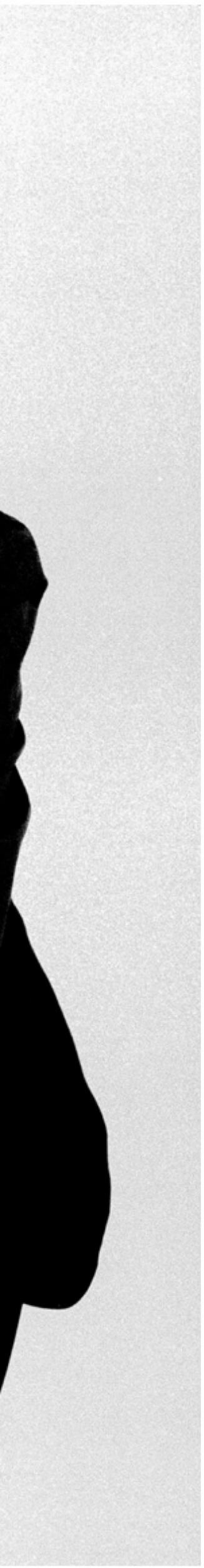
But the film resonates over a century after it was made not just because of its visual style. The idea of a search for truth in a world gone mad is as urgent today as it was in 1920.

"At first, it seems to be a quest for truth, because the main character is like Sherlock Holmes," says Karl. "But then you find out he's crazy. You really don't know where you are. And that seems to be about the disappearance of reality, which we are facing now. Alternative facts. Nothing is real."

There he goes, with 'Strawberry Fields Forever' again.

"I'll tell you one thing," Karl chuckles as we conclude our conversation. "If you read about 'Caligari' and if you see the movie with my music, you won't get rid of it!"

'The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari' is out now on Bureau B



UTOPIAN VALUES

A contemplation of success and the power of hope, Yard Act's much-anticipated second album finds the innovative Leeds outfit in superlative form

WORDS: JIM BUTLER

Yard Act frontman James Smith, as shall soon become clear, is not someone content to rest on his laurels. 'The Overload', his band's phenomenally successful debut album of two years ago, hit Number Two (with a bullet) and received a further shot in the arm with a Mercury Prize nomination.

Since then, Smith could have been excused for lapping up the increasingly prestigious festival slots, collaborating with the likes of Elton John, and just sitting back and reflecting on finally achieving his teenage dreams of musical stardom. Or he could have shrivelled under the weight of untold critical hosannas and exited stage left. He did neither. Instead, he just got back to work.

"I cannot do nothing," the affable singer insists. "It bores me. I've got to do summat – that's who I am. It's annoying for you lot, when you're all trying to sleep and I'm there plugging the microphone into the laptop."

A case in point. Bassist Ryan Needham (he and Smith are Yard Act's creative linchpin) brings up a time in the summer of 2022 when they were staying at a luxurious French chateau. Sandwiched between two weekends of European festival dates, the four-day sojourn was designed to give the band – which also includes guitarist Sam Shipstone and drummer Jay Russell – some much-needed rest and recuperation. Except the rundown Smith couldn't settle.

"You were in a chateau in France," says Needham, gesturing towards Smith. "You were ill and yet you still couldn't relax."

Another more recent memory stirs Needham, after the band capped off 2023 with a string of triumphant dates in Japan.

"Can you remember when we were walking down the street in Japan the other week? You turned to me and said, 'Do you think I'll ever be able to relax?'"

"I know, but there were hornets in the chateau's swimming pool," replies Smith, smiling. "So I couldn't go out there. It was hardly relaxing outside in the sun. I'm not an anxious person, or nervous or stressed. I don't have insomnia – I go down, sleep eight hours, and then wake up. So I'm in control of that stuff. But I cannot do nothing."

What he did do in the chateau was write the centrepiece of Yard Act's fantastic new album, 'Where's My Utopia?'. The stirring seven-and-a-half-minute kitchen-sink opus 'Blackpool Illuminations' is to this record what the beautifully observed life story 'Tall Poppies' was to their debut, 'The Overload'.

Set to Sam Shipstone's plaintive but oddly affecting guitar line and a wispy Afrobeat groove, 'Blackpool Illuminations' is a three-part, intergenerational confessional taking in Smith's visits to the Vegas of the North, first as a rambunctious six-year-old in 1996 (where he splits both his lips, much to the chagrin of his parents), then a drug-fuelled teenage return ("A beautiful day / Suddenly blurred out over the PA") and finally completing the circle by bringing his infant son to the place of so many of his formative memories, so starting the story all over again.

An evocative tale, 'Blackpool Illuminations' is funny and tender and, at the same time, paranoid and fearful – competing traits common to new parents.

"I don't know why it fell out like that," reflects Smith. "Or what I was thinking about when I bust my lip. It all stemmed from that. I could remember it so vividly. Maybe it was because I was ill. Maybe it was injury and illness, I was connecting them and pining for some nurturing… I don't know. This isn't definitive, it's just me musing."

He does quite a lot of musing on 'Where's My Utopia?'. While 'The Overload' incorporated the thoughts of a litany of colourful characters, allowing Smith to explore the post-Brexit landscape of a Covid-ravaged Britain ("It's called 'The Overload' because I was watching this overload of information come at me through a screen for two years, while I couldn't move"), this time around he wanted to reveal a bit more of himself.

"I felt like I'd worked on characters a lot and I'd put this front up," he explains. "And I think that front is important. That overtly sarcastic pointing at things and going [adopts sneering tone], 'Oh, look at this, what's going on here, then?' – that's a key component of my stage persona that has served me well. But once you have an audience, I think it's your duty to take them along on the ride and reveal more of yourself."

Write about what you know, they say. Only with this album, as Needham points out, they weren't locked down, but "sort of locked out". Away on tour for weeks and weeks on end, and allied to the birth of Smith's son, 'Where's My Utopia?' became a contemplation on success and what kind of world was being left for future generations, all served with a side dish pondering the reliability of memory and the power of hope and change.

"Which made everyone panic when they realised that's what I'd decided to write an entire album about – how depressing it was to be in a successful band," explains Smith, as Needham and Shipstone both chortle.

Thankfully, the reality is far from depressing. 'Where's My Utopia?' retains the riotous exuberance of its acclaimed predecessor and artfully turns everything up to 11.

Musically, the breadth is impressive. Because many reviews of 'The Overload' fixated on an admittedly fertile post-punk aesthetic at the expense of the hip hop storytelling – Smith coming on as much Mike Skinner as Alex Turner – and a subtly pleasing punk-funk groove, not least on the pivotal '100% Endurance' ("That is the song where I do let my guard down"), the band were determined to push their ambition this time. And buoyed by the confidence of 'The Overload', that's exactly what they've done.

"I was getting a bit annoyed that we kept being called a post-punk band over and over again," explains Smith. "I didn't hear it that way. I could hear all those other influences."

So, alongside the "stand-offish, sarcastic, post-punk stylings" that Yard Act leaned heavily into on 'The Overload', 'Where's My Utopia?' is suffused with a variety of influences. There's hip hop (particularly in the way that samples are the bedrock of many tracks, most notably 'Down By The Stream'), electronica, house, gospel, disco, indie rock and psychedelic jazz.

It's cheeky, knowing and understated – a sort of postmodern mid-90s album. The spirit of Beck is teasingly perceptive across tracks such as the Link Wray-meets-Spiritualized collage of 'An Illusion' and the rasping garage rock of 'Petroleum'. 'The Undertow' recalls the similarly literate Pulp, 'Fizzy Fish' is a spunkier primetime Blur, and 'When The Laughter Stops' hints at what Blondie would have sounded like if they'd ever met Daft Punk.

Add the exotic salsa funk of 'Dream Job', the propulsive indie-meets-futuristic jazz of 'We Make Hits' and the closing disco-funk of 'A Vineyard For The North', and it's the sound of a band having the time of their lives. Whereas 'The Overload' was a record made by a band that weren't really a band (it was essentially Smith and Needham's record – Shipstone and Russell didn't join until later), 'Where's My Utopia?' is Yard Act in totality.

"The first album almost feels like it's a collection of demos, really," reflects Smith. "But this one feels like a proper record because we all made it together. We've been playing together so much and sharing so much music that it came quite naturally."

"It feels like 'album one' because it's the first time we've all worked together in this way," adds Needham. "So, basically, number three is gonna be the shit one [laughs]. Sorry, I mean the hard one! For this, we've kind of had a free life."

So, is this the *real* debut album?

"Maybe," says Smith, cagily. "We didn't really know what Yard Act was. It was kind of me and Ryan writing a couple of tunes that got carried away with themselves, mainly because BBC 6 Music picked up on them during that time when everyone was listening to the radio all day, every day.

"It was like, 'Oh, shit, something is happening!', but we didn't have a band. And then Sam joined. By the time Jay came in, we didn't know if we were ever going to tour again. And then – I have no shame in saying this – the band got really good. The live band is incredible. They can play so well. And I get to stand at the front and gob off. It's brilliant.

"They got so good that it was apparent we had something special this time. Obviously, we had something special the first time too, but it was different. This time, it really does feel like a band. It's the first record that we've all played on and that's really exciting."

Such elation and assurance are clearly apparent in Smith's iron-clad – and humorous – conviction that the band could do whatever they wanted. The coherence comes from the simple fact that it's them.

"It doesn't have to come from any previous formula that people think we're trying to adhere to," he laughs. "That was something I was keen to shake. I was determined to prove people wrong about us.

"Even people who liked us because they loved post-punk – 'Oh, they're cool, they're a post-punk band' – I was like, 'No! That's not us'. That annoyed me more than people who said, 'Oh, they're shit, they're just a post-punk band.'

"I was determined not to be pigeonholed, so in that sense, everyone was on the same wavelength. We were all thinking, 'We can do what we want'.

"And it's nothing that outlandish. I've never heard a piece of music I found *so* outlandish that it baffled me, anyway. I think you can always trace people's influences and what they like. It draws from a broad palette because we love loads of different stuff. That's the joy of the album – the playfulness of it."

Yard Act must be one of British music's most endearing success stories of recent times. Assembled from the detritus of various Yorkshire groups, these outward-looking 30/40-somethings have a refreshingly honest take on what this has meant to them.

"I've just realised that I've got a Chart Award here," laughs Needham, as everyone zeroes in on said gong. "It's probably not a good look!"

"Just to be completely transparent – in case this isn't clear – I wanted to be successful since I was a teenager who loved bands," says Smith. "I really wanted it, but I didn't get it until my early 30s. I've experienced playing to empty rooms for years and years. It's shit, but it didn't mean I would give up on music because I didn't have it."

Smith happily admits he's got success ("It's way better than not having it") but the calendar for 2024 is already filling up, and he's wondering about when he's going to have time to see his son. Still, it's been worth the long wait.

"That's what the album's about, really," he says. "Yeah, it was worth it. But it's like anything – you don't tick a box and get happiness, which I kind of knew. It's great to know that your work has connected… well, it's not even that, because that is out of your control. I don't write songs for other people, even. I've not got some weird saviour narrative that it's my job to affect people's lives with my thoughts."

"Stuff like awards is like getting 'Employee Of The Month' at work," says Needham, chipping in. "You don't really give a shit, but it's kind of nice. It's a laugh, and you can joke with your mates."

"Some of the perks of the Mercury – that Kraken rum and… what else did we get?" asks Smith. "A top-up card for EE or summat. They were the incentives that were worthwhile!

"I think the whole success thing is quite balanced, though. Inevitably, there will be a point, probably in the not too distant future, where people aren't interested in what we do. We'll have wilderness years and we won't come back from them, but that's just part of it. You ride the wave and you don't think too much about it."

"I haven't got time for wilderness years!" shouts Needham. "I'm 43 – I can't have any more wilderness years. There's not enough time."

"You can have a short wilderness year," says Smith.

"I can have a wilderness *month*," shoots back Needham.

The point being that change is the only constant – from the nature and sound of the band to the wider world – a fact that's magnified by looking at things through a child's eyes. Change not only helps make sense of the cataclysmic events of recent times, but it also offers some sort of succour and a bulwark against the ongoing follies.

All this will pass. Yard Act will soundtrack some of these times. But they won't be there for all of it. Change explains James Smith's unending curiosity and his inability to switch off.

"It's probably why I always want to do stuff because change is the only… change is momentum," he concludes. "Staying stationary isn't an option. Movement and momentum are everything. You can be static within the momentum and that's important too. You just can't be stagnant.

"I would like to sit back and not have to change all the time. But change is cool, innit? That's why you discover so much new stuff. I'm not ready to sit back and look at my album award and go, 'Look what I did when I was 31, wasn't that brilliant?' I don't want to do that. I don't want to count my shiny things. I want to see what comes next."

'Where's My Utopia?' is released by Island on 1 March

SHINE ON

Embracing modular synths, acoustic instrumentation and superb depth of expression, composer Maya Shenfeld's sumptuous arrangements make for a hugely compelling listening experience

WORDS: OLI WARWICK

"As with many things in life, you go on an adventure and you don't really think, 'What's going to happen?'."

Composer Maya Shenfeld is recounting the artistic expedition she undertook in Portugal with her visual collaborator, the filmmaker Pedro Maia, to one of the world's deepest marble quarries. Her eyes light up as she describes the dramatic setting, but there's also a shakiness in her voice.

"We got to the site and Pedro said, 'OK, shall we go?', and I'm like, 'What do you mean, go?'. When you look down, you get instantly dizzy. Imagine New York City skyscrapers, inverted downwards. There are all these super-steep ladders to climb up and down, and you're pushing the boundaries of loss of horizon and vertigo – kind of flirting with freefall."

It didn't help that Portugal was in the grip of an extreme heatwave, with the landlocked mine in Vila Viçosa reaching temperatures of 45 degrees. But the two ventured into its unfathomable depths to capture imagery and sound that would feed into Shenfeld's new album, 'Under The Sun'.

"We quite literally explored the topic of being under the sun," she says.

The album's second track, 'Tehom', instantly transports you to Shenfeld's adventurous destination. Industrial scrapes draped in expansive reverb cut through the tense silence, creating a palpable tension and a sense of vast space. It's a forbidding listen, but an undeniably powerful one.

"The reverberation in the deepest quarry was very, very long," explains Shenfeld. "It was really interesting to play with, but not too easy to record because it's not a peaceful, passive, historical kind of place. It's mostly the sound of digging and machines."

PHOTO: NEVEN ALLGEIER

The metallic rattle and chasmic decays could have set the tone for a full long-player of nerve-shredding atmospherics, but the pervading darkness of 'Tehom' is just one dimension of the sound Shenfeld explores. Other tracks, such as 'A Guide For The Perplexed' and 'Geist', are defined by richly melodic composition as much as moody sound design.

The concept of 'Under The Sun' was sparked by a book Shenfeld read at her family home in Jerusalem, where she grew up. Written by a family friend, it's a modern secular interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes from the Old Testament, which features the phrase "there is nothing new under the sun".

"The book really blew my mind," says Shenfeld. "It's been a rough couple of years for humanity, to say the least, so it does make one ask, 'What repeats as a pattern in the history of mankind, and how much agency do I have as an individual to impact that?'. I was thinking about the inability – or ability – to impact one's own destiny and how to be a good, responsible human.

"I think through grasping this very difficult question, I want to believe that not everything repeats in a pattern, that every day something *is* changing, that there *is* something new under the sun. Also, as an image, the sun as a force of stability and threat was really strong for me," she nods with a grim understanding to the conflict unfolding in the region she was born in, as well as the challenges posed by climate change.

The sweltering heat at the site was a fitting backdrop to the theme she'd been contemplating when she first spoke with Maia, who also worked with Shenfeld on her debut album, 'In Free Fall'. Their expedition came about after a conversation they'd had in Shenfeld's adopted home of Berlin about a possible location in which to explore these themes creatively.

The quarry seemed fitting – the ancient impermeability of the stone versus the human drive for industrial-scale consumption, all crystallised under the intense glare of the sun, in a place where the breeze cannot even reach to offer relief.

When they entered the space, they took with them a range of drones and cameras to be able to capture the vast geometry of the space. Maia incorporated this footage into the visuals accompanying Shenfeld's live shows for 'Under The Sun', which debuted at Sweden's Intonal Festival in April 2023. That show and subsequent performances came before she had finalised the album.

"I wanted to have the experience of playing the music for people before locking it for release," she explains. "I did that with 'In Free Fall' too, and I think it's a really important part of the maturing of the piece."

As well as gathering material for the live visuals, Maia and Shenfeld also used the quarry setting as a stage for the video to 'Interstellar', the lead single from 'Under The Sun'. The sense of blistering heat is palpable in the stark light reflecting off the towering boulders and canyons, and is accentuated by the arid dust which clings to Shenfeld as she poses in situ and draws her own orbits. The Super 8-style treatment of the footage runs hot as well, as though the imaginary film might bubble and dissolve beneath the sun's unrelenting glare.

PHOTO: NEVEN ALLGEIER

Sonically, ‘Interstellar’ isn’t as directly reflective of the quarry as the likes of ‘Tehom’. It’s a roundly melodic, synth-driven piece which speaks to Shenfeld’s path in music to date. Her roots lie in classical guitar, which she learned from a young age at a dedicated school in Jerusalem, growing up within the stricture of classical music and continuing her studies abroad. Looking to experience life elsewhere, she enrolled at Berlin’s Universität Der Künste (University of the Arts) and transferred from a performing arts undergraduate course to studying composition.

During this time, her curiosity had her questioning the limitations of the classical world, such as the inability to explore different disciplines. While studying, she found the time to compose and work on site-specific commissions, but she also forged connections in alternative music scenes, which encouraged her to spread her wings.

“I was feeling a little bit claustrophobic in this world,” she says. “I love classical music, but coming from that background and being in academia, I needed some time to explore and do other things. I joined a punk band for a couple of years and spent some time in India. Being in a band helped me realise that music is art, and anyone can make sound art. That could be at an academic level, but it could also be at a level that speaks to a local community, and both are equally valuable in terms of cultural contribution.”

The formal training hardwired into Shenfeld’s musical practice manifests in many ways on ‘Under The Sun’. It opens with the track, ‘A Guide For The Perplexed’, which unmistakably fulfils the role of an overture for the album. A brightly melodic arrangement for woodwind and synth that stretches out for seven minutes, it’s cast in sustained notes as a palate-cleanser, inviting the listener to slow down and prepare for the full experience of the album.

Contrasting so starkly with the clank and boom of follow-on track ‘Tehom’, it gives the impression of a cinematic experience which correlates with the work Shenfeld has done in soundtrack production. Thanks to the strident analogue arpeggio which propels it, ‘Interstellar’ feels more contemporary, though it’s firmly rooted in compositional theory and acts as a sister piece

PHOTO: ADRIANO FERREIRA BORGES

to 'Body, Electric' from 'In Free Fall'. Both tracks are some of the most synth-focused in Shenfeld's recorded repertoire, but they're formally constructed.

"They are written in the form of a traditional romantic sonata," she says. "When I was working on the first one, it was a challenge because it's a bit mathematical, and there are specific sections and harmonic rules on how you move through these before the recapitulation of the themes."

Shenfeld admits it's difficult to shake off her formal training ("I can always push my boundaries more"), but as her two albums to date attest, the maturity of her work is a vital ingredient in what makes her take on neoclassical and ambient music so compelling. The experience of escaping into the free-form world of punk rock and experimental music has given her music a necessary edge, though. With a background in classical guitar, there was a lot for her to learn about tone and processing.

"At the time my friends invited me to jam, I was very much a beginner," she admits. "I could play the fretboard, but I was new to electric guitars. So then I got acquainted with this whole world of nerding out about tube amps, pedals, and how it's very important to get the right sound. Setting up a pedal board taught me a lot about electronic music. The minute I understood – you're just sending a signal from point A to point B – the transition from pedal board to modular synth was easy."

It's modular synthesis that Shenfeld employs on most of the standout moments on 'Under The Sun', experimenting with different oscillators and merging them with the organ in St Matthäus-Kirche (St Matthew's Church), Berlin, the solemn voices of the Ritter Youth Choir and the spread of other organic sound sources. Her challenge was in how to give her electronic elements the depth of expression she's conditioned to expect from classical instrumentation. For 'Interstellar', it was a painstaking process to get just the right feeling from a synth sequence which is so prominent in, and indeed central to, the whole album.

"'Interstellar' is produced with woodwinds," she explains. "So you hear an oboe, and my whole mission was getting the synth to breathe with that same feeling. You run the sequence through the machine, and it doesn't feel like someone telling a story in the way a guitarist or violinist would. You get that by working on the envelope, basically. There are 120 versions of that track on my hard drive. It took me a long time to get it to the place I wanted."

By way of contrast, 'Geist' was a "rare creature" that came together in one session. It's a more patient arrangement than the movement and fine detail of 'Interstellar', but no less compelling in its teasing layers of drone, discord and texture. In Shenfeld's work, the immediacy of punk-minded experimentation has an equal footing with the considered poise of more traditional composition, and sometimes the distinct disciplines quicken or slow the creative process in unexpected ways.

When she wrote and recorded 'In Free Fall', Shenfeld was keen to break away from her established practice in site-specific commissions which are ephemeral in nature. Creating more permanent work set in train a creative arc against which her music is now measured, at least for the outside listener.

"For 'Under The Sun', I intentionally wanted to expand on the language I'd developed for 'In Free Fall'," she says. "I have lots of other plans. The dream is to do an album locked in a studio for a weekend, playing all my instruments to see what comes out."

She also pines for a return to the electric guitar work she first explored in bands. She hasn't had much time to dedicate to it, apart from a recent commission for Berlin's Heroines Of Sound festival, where she performed solo on a quadrophonic sound system. Whatever comes next, though, is sure to maintain the mix of deep knowledge and free-spirited curiosity that makes Maya Shenfeld's work so compelling.

"The point is to stay open-minded enough to jam with people and see where music takes you," she smiles.

'Under The Sun' is released by Thrill Jockey on 23 February

TALES FROM THE LOOP

DREW MULHOLLAND

Sound obsessive, tape loop guru, godfather of hauntology and – least likely of all – teen pin-up. For five decades, Drew Mulholland has been walking a very individual path

WORDS: BOB FISCHER
PICTURES: HANA AAROW

"I once dreamed that I was in a club, in a box overlooking the stage," begins Drew Mulholland. "Glen Matlock, Steve Jones and Paul Cook came out and started playing the most amazing Sex Pistols riff ever. But then the singer appeared… and it was Sid James. Dressed as he was in 'Carry On Camping'. And the group was called The Sid Pistols! While the riff was playing, he just walked up and down the front of the stage, leering and laughing at the girls in the front row, 'hyak, hyak, hyak'.

"Some time later, I was playing my 'Anarchy In The UK' single at home. I put it on and walked away from it, but I'd forgotten to change the record player from 33 rpm to 45 rpm. So when Johnny Rotten started laughing – 'hyak, hyak, hyak' – it sounded exactly like Sid James! I thought, 'Have I always known that? Did my brain recognise that and put it into my dream?'. It's a weird connection."

It's a dark and filthy winter's afternoon. Freezing rain is lashing against the windows of Drew's book-lined Glasgow apartment, but we have steaming coffee and apple turnovers, and we're cosily contemplating the interconnectedness of all things, so life is sweet. Drew Mulholland is splendid company, and he's now spent over 50 years exploring those "weird connections" between sound, music, memory, the paranormal and pretty much everything else in between. His new book, 'Elizabethan Tape Loops', is a love letter to what he calls "the path" and to the teenage friend who began the journey with him, back in the early 1970s.

"I was walking down the road one day, when I saw Paul Cavanan in his garden," remembers Drew. "I was absolutely convinced I knew him from somewhere, so I stopped and said hello, and we just started talking. And we never stopped.

"Paul was a couple of years older than me and had friends at school who were a couple of years older than him. He came in one day and said, 'You know Marek? He's got a group called Lodestone and they've made a tape'. He put it on, and it was the sound of a ball bearing rolling down a drainpipe… and it just kept going. I said, 'What's on the other side?', and Paul said, 'No, look!', and inside the cassette was a homemade tape loop. And it was just… [he visibly shivers] I can feel it even now. 'This is brilliant – and anyone can do it. Which means *I* can do it'. Up until that point, people who made records lived in mansions. But this was an 'in' for people like us. We instantly started making tape loops ourselves."

It was 1973. Drew and Paul lived in Mount Vernon, a "weird little island" of an east Glasgow suburb, their houses sandwiched between a railway breaker's yard and a farmer's field riddled with spent wartime ack-ack shells.

And their interests in the more esoteric aspects of the musical world expanded even further when Drew discovered the illicit thrills of shoplifting. In particular, the BBC Radiophonic Workshop's 1976 album, 'Out Of This World'. Where did he pilfer it from, I wonder? Glasgow Woolworths?

"No, it was more dangerous than that," he smiles. "Do you know the Barras Market? It's in the east end of Glasgow, and if a stallholder caught you shoplifting… well, he wouldn't call the police. I'm not going to say any more. But I was 15, I had no money, and I thought, 'Right, I'm having this'. It looked spacey, and it had 'Doctor Who' on the sleeve. And the tracks that jumped out at me were all credited to 'DD'. Delia Derbyshire. Sound effects albums were a huge thing for me, too – motorboats panning from left to right! They were brilliant."

I was the same, I tell him. The idea of using sound as a medium to transport me from the everyday humdrum was incredibly alluring.

"That was it," says Drew. "It was the sound world that interested me, then the electronic music. All these things coming from different directions that seemed to make a whole.

"Then Paul and I got very interested in the Baader-Meinhof group, and why it was happening. Paul said, 'Could you make me the sound of a terrorist attack?'. So I got my BBC Sound Effects albums and made a recording, but I let the blank tape run for about 40 seconds first. So when Paul came round, I said, 'I'll get some tea', and went into the kitchen… and my timing, for once, was spot on. I gave him his tea then went back for biscuits, counting down '7-6-5…' in my head. Then it went off, and it was *very* loud. I heard a yelp, and Paul had spilled PG Tips all over his crotch."

Punk happened. There was a photocopied fanzine – Mount Vernon's Burning – and a short-lived band called The Targets ("I was thrown out of my own band in my own garage," sighs Drew). But unlikely dreams of pop subversion were beginning to coalesce.

"Paul introduced me to a guy called Dennis, who had a bass and needed a guitarist. We met up and got on like a house on fire, we got a singer and a drummer, and called ourselves Pioneers West. We had the ridiculous idea of writing the most poppy 1980s music imaginable to get signed by a big label, then telling them we weren't doing that anymore and recording all this weird stuff instead. We had a friend, Alex, who became our manager. He phoned up one day and said, 'I've got you a piece in a magazine. It's a double-page spread in Jackie'."

What?! You were actually in Jackie, the magazine for teenage girls?

"Yep," he confirms, wincing. "June 1985, with Madonna on the cover. The angle was that we didn't yet have an image, so Jackie said they'd come up and do pictures of us, before and after. They sent us shopping with two really nice young women, then to a photographic studio in the west end of Glasgow with these rotten Duran Duran clothes on. It was just horrendous. And I'll never forget, when we were getting changed afterwards, our keyboard player put his arm around me and said, 'Drew, think about it. When we get signed, *every day* will be like this'. I just said, 'I'm leaving. This is absolutely shite, and there's nothing about it that interests me'."

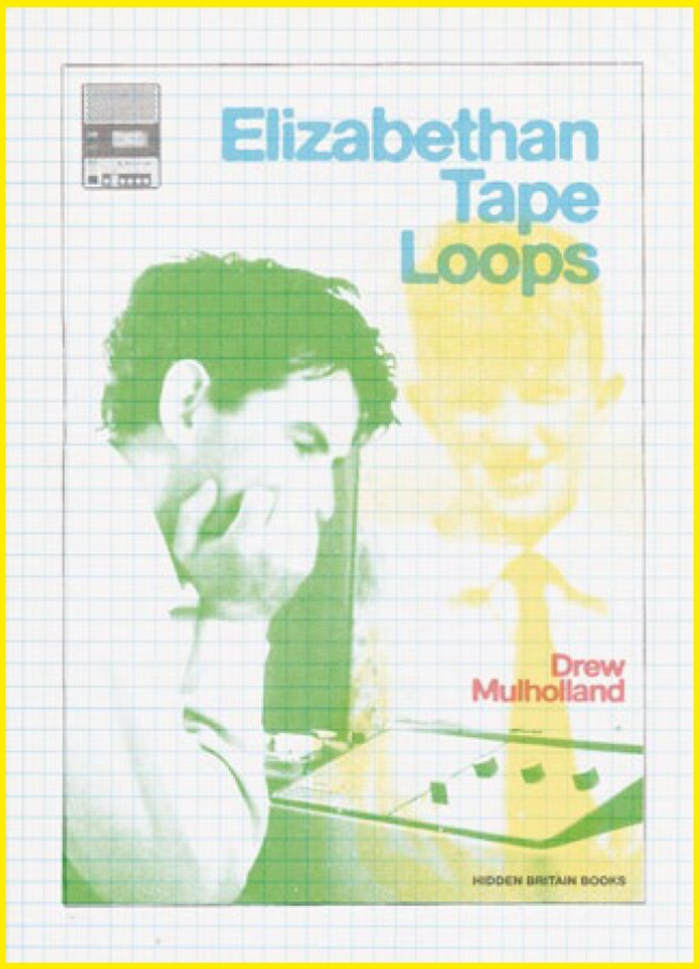
He remains publicity-shy, with a sense of modesty that is, he suggests, almost part of the genetic make-up of east Glasgow. A recently released compilation, 'Deltic Vespers', showcases his 4-track recordings of the 1980s, and they're a mile away from the pop dreams of Jackie magazine. Scary tape loops and drones are interspersed with '96 Tears'-style garage workouts. By 1996, he was recording as Mount Vernon Arts Lab, with cassettes initially sold through local record shops ("They were in see-through bags from Tesco"), attracting a burgeoning fanbase.

Both Teenage Fanclub's Norman Blake and Pete "Sonic Boom" Kember featured on 1998's debut album proper, 'Gummy Twinkle'. Kember, Drew reveals gleefully, even put him in touch with Delia Derbyshire for a series of life-enriching phone conversations.

"He found her in the Northampton phone book," he smiles. "After we got to know each other, Delia would tell me stuff about meeting Brian Jones and The Beatles. It was all new-fangled pop music to her, but she had enough about her to connect with people like that. It was a very enjoyable education. I was talking to someone who was there for all the stuff I'd grown up reading about."

'Warminster', meanwhile, was a 1999 collaboration with Portishead guitarist Adrian Utley. A Radiophonic Workshop-inspired exploration of a spate of 1970s Wiltshire UFO sightings, it showcased Drew's lifelong fascination with the otherworldly.

"I only remember one big argument with my dad," he recalls. "He said you could time-travel to the past, but you couldn't go into the future, and I disagreed with him. We watched a lot of sci-fi and horror films, and if



something came up in the film, we'd run with it and have discussion after discussion. The books I had as a kid were all about the Bermuda Triangle and Charles Berlitz, and my dad was the same as me – we were interested in why people believed in it all."

The fascination peaked on 'The Séance At Hobs Lane', a 2001 album exploring 18th century occultism, 'Quatermass And The Pit' and the psychogeographical resonance of abandoned underground stations. Blake and Utley contributed again, together with Coil's John Balance, Barry 7 of Add N To (X) and Belle & Sebastian's Isobel Campbell. It's a stunning piece of work and, with hindsight, a distinct turning point on "the path". But it was only five years later, during a lean musical patch, that the album began to gather its own momentum.

"My daughter was in a newsagent's looking for a comic, and I picked up The Wire magazine," explains Drew. "I hadn't seen it for years, but I opened it at random, and there was Mount Vernon Arts Lab! They were interviewing Jim Jupp from Ghost Box, who said one of the main influences in founding the label had been 'The Séance At Hobs Lane'. I emailed him and said, 'Thanks – it's nice to know that the album has a life of its own'. Because, as far as I was concerned, it was all over. But he mailed back and said, 'Can we re-release it?' – and that was the beginning of Part Two, really. The next phase."

And so, quite accidentally, Drew Mulholland became the godfather of hauntology. Over the last decade, his interests have taken him from sweaty gig venues to academic halls. He's worked in the psychology department of Glasgow Caledonian University, and has been the geography department's official composer-in-residence. There has been an overwhelming flurry of new albums – including 'Three Antennas In A Quarry', a realisation of a lost 1960s score sent to Drew and Pete Kember by their revered Delia Derbyshire. His love of the uncanny remains paramount, together with his adoration of vintage horror films, an obsession reaching its apex on 2019's 'The Wicker Tapes'.

"I went with my friend David to do 'The Wicker Man' tour," he explains. "We visited all the film locations, and nothing had changed. We got to the pub door – two grown men – and I said, 'I can't go in!'. But the last place we went to was Burrow Head, and David called me over excitedly. There they were… the stumps of the Wicker Man's legs. With broken wood from them just lying around on the clifftop. I said, 'Back to the car, get as many carrier bags as you can!'."

There is, I suggest, an alchemical quality to his tape experiments. Loops created for 'The Wicker Tapes' were spooled around one of the Burrow Head slivers, a fragment of the actual "wicker man" itself. For 2020's 'A Haunting Strip Of Marshland', he ground lichen with a pestle and mortar and glued it to the master tapes. Does his interest in the paranormal, I wonder, stretch to the recording process? Can these physical rituals somehow magically imbue his albums with an extra essence of the inspiration behind them?

"It depends," he says. "You've got a tape loop going round a piece of wood from 'The Wicker Man'. So on one level, it makes a physical impression on the tape. But then we head into fantastical thinking. Is there something about 'The Wicker Man' in this piece of wood that somehow goes into the sounds on the tape? And that's a psychological area. There's a classic psychology device; the lecturer comes out carrying a cardigan. He gives it to the students and asks what they think of it as they pass it around. And they say, 'Nice design, a bit retro'. 'Oh, you like it then?' 'Yeah!' And then he says, 'It used to belong to Adolf Hitler'.

"So instantly, it becomes something else. And obviously, it's just the lecturer's cardigan – it never belonged to Hitler at all. But it's the same principle as the wood from 'The Wicker Man'. 'Here's a piece of wood…' 'Right.' 'Here's a piece of wood from the 'The Wicker Man.' 'What?!' And that's the area I've gone into, without realising it."

But are those properties something we impose, rather than something intrinsic about the object itself?

"Yes, they come from us."

He talks excitedly of future projects. This year will see an album based on the portmanteau horror films of the 1970s and a collaboration with Generation X guitarist Derwood Andrews that also features the fretboard talents of Paul McGann – yes, *that* Paul McGann. "The path", as he describes it, has been long, winding and fascinating. And the book feels like a tribute to the man who was there at the start. Drew's teenage comrade Paul Canavan died in 1997, and 'Elizabethan Tape Loops' is clearly an extended "thank you" to his friend.

"Yeah, it is," he smiles. "I thought I had to acknowledge that where I've ended up is all down to that man. And of course, in writing it, I've remembered things, places, smells. Phone calls on Saturday mornings. 'Get down to this house – you've got to hear this record! What do you mean you've never heard of The Sensational Alex Harvey Band?'"

So Paul started it all?

"Yeah…"

Drew Mulholland pauses, and the Glaswegian modesty gene kicks in once again.

"Or it's his fault."

'Elizabethan Tape Loops' is out now, published by Hidden Britain

FUNNY BUSINESS

Office For Personal Development are both a great synthpop band and a mischievous spoof of the more sinister side of motivational corporate culture. Where the line falls is anybody's guess...

WORDS: BOB FISCHER
PICTURE: JOHN CHEVES

"I've managed to reach 38 years old without ever actually having worked in an office," says Trevor Moss. "But I think it's probably a case of the grass always being greener. Everyone working in an office wishes they were musicians, and every musician just wishes they had a regular pay cheque…"

With a merciless satirical eye, Trevor is now happily combining these disparate callings. He has become the driving force behind Office For Personal Development, a brilliant, razor-sharp synthpop spoof of testosterone-driven corporate culture. OPD's debut album, 'Doing. Is. Thinking.', comprises 11 shimmering anthems to shiny-toothed capitalism, with the musician now cast as cufflink-fiddling motivational guru, Trevor Deeble.

As we speak on a wintry morning, Trevor is already in character. Suited and booted, he sports immaculate lapels and an unpleasantly fluorescent tie. Behind him is what appears to be a bustling open-plan office, festooned with the pastel-green logos of this thrusting new enterprise.

Impressive? Of course. But as he intones in a robotic monotone amid the relentless bleeps of the album's title track, "Thinking is the path that leads to not doing…"

Nevertheless, there are important questions that need answering. This is all a crunching gear change from his previous musical career as an accomplished folkie. In the 2000s, Trevor and his now-wife Hannah were part of bluegrass outfit Indigo Moss, before finding further acclaim as acoustic duo Trevor Moss & Hannah-Lou. Success was not entirely elusive – they played the Royal Albert Hall and toured with Beth Orton and Tori Amos. But as Trevor explains, it was his disillusionment with the commercialisation of folk music that provided the spark of inspiration for Office For Personal Development.

"Everything became very corporate and slick," he says. "We'd play a folk festival, and – without any irony – artists would turn up wearing the sponsor's T-shirt and carrying rolled-up banners. I found it bizarre. But as a musician, you *do* have to lead a strange double life. You just want to be an artist, but the marketing aspect has become so prevalent. It takes up so much of your time. So OPD felt like a natural vehicle to make a comment about that process."

And the conversion from one-take, harmonised folk music to pounding, electronic anthems? So where did that come from?

"Me and Hannah couldn't really tour anymore because of the kids, and I'd just finished a solo record," he recalls. "It was done, mixed and mastered and I listened to it back… and I was just completely bored. So I shelved it. I started experimenting with electronic music instead and went down the wormhole. It was a totally fresh start. I'd never used a MIDI keyboard, never touched a drum machine, and I didn't know how anything worked at all.

"Then two things converged. Me and Hannah were coming back from a festival, and throwing ideas around for what I could do with my new electronic thing. And an advert came on the radio for one of those wellbeing and mindfulness courses. It was made to sound so corporate and shiny, and I just thought, 'That's it! That's what I want to do'."

And so Trevor Moss, folk musician, became Trevor Deeble, the director of OPD and wannabe motivational guru. You know those strange and sinister organisations that offer self-improvement programmes and worryingly intense mentorship in return for unwavering cult-like devotion and a modest five-figure sum? OPD mercilessly spoofs them all, not least with their relentlessly inventive live shows. Together, Trevor and his bandmates Del Querns (Head of IT) and Jenna Love (Goals Liaison Officer) have created an immersive and theatrical experience.

"I enter through the audience shaking hands with everybody on the way," says Trevor. "People have no idea what's going on. Their first encounter is often me right in front of them, giving them a lanyard! And there are team-building and trust exercises throughout the show. You know at metal gigs, when they separate the audience into two halves? We do that, and when the song starts you have to rush across the room, shake hands with someone and tell them what your goals are for the next quarter."

It sounds great fun, but I find it hard to believe that Trevor has genuine affection for this uber-corporate world. Is there a lot of anger in there as well?

"There is," he concedes. "But I think a lot of those corporate motivational speakers are like that, too. I've often thought they come from a position of bitterness. They're quite damaged people who maybe didn't succeed as much as they wanted to – had they actually *become* millionaires, they wouldn't be running these schemes, would they? And that element of tragic failure comes out in the show. My character has a breakdown and ends up half-naked, standing on his head."

The reaction from his folk contemporaries, he admits, has been one of bemusement. But at least one synthpop legend has given OPD his seal of approval. The whole project feels like the spiritual heir of 'Penthouse And Pavement', Heaven 17's monolithic 1981 album of joyous yuppie-baiting. Trevor nods and reveals that high-level talks with Martyn Ware have already taken place.

"Yes, we had a really good conversation about the creative potential of pop," says Trevor. "And Martyn said a similar thing to me – that he was disappointed pop music seems to have lost its creative soul. Pop is where the avant-garde should reside, and traditionally it always has. It's where boundaries should be pushed."

And has that 1980s aesthetic also pushed its way into the Office For Personal Development philosophy? This is, lest we forget, a group clad in suits from Burton menswear. The title track from 'Doing. Is. Thinking.' was even released as a limited edition single on a three-and-a-half-inch floppy disk.

"I think all that has happened quite naturally," says Trevor. "Nostalgia is good fun, isn't it? But I think the OPD will quickly develop. For the next album, the suits might go. Artistically, it's a bit *too* straightforward if you're doing synthpop and dressing like it's the 1980s.

"So the second album will most probably be about hoodies and webcams. And people working from home…"

'Doing. Is. Thinking.' is out now on Bex-Pop

PATTERN RECOGNITION

American composer and sound artist Tristan Perich tells us about using 1-bit electronics, working with organ virtuoso James McVinnie, and the importance of patterns in making music

WORDS: JONATHAN WRIGHT
PICTURE: SHERVIN LAINEZ

Sometimes, all it takes is a quick email to get things moving. A case in point is the collaboration between New Yorker Tristan Perich, a contemporary-classical composer drawn to the possibilities of the most basic electronic sounds, and British organist James McVinnie, who's currently a resident artist at London's Southbank Centre. The partnership began when McVinnie saw Canadian pianist Vicky Chow perform 'Surface Image' – a piece for solo piano and 40-channel 1-bit electronics, composed with Perich – in Latvia in 2016.

"James wrote to me to see if he could play it sometime," says Perich down the line from New York. "And then two hours later, he sent a follow-up email. He's like, 'By the way, how do you feel about the organ?', so I just immediately wrote back, 'I've wanted to do a big project for organ for a really long time'."

"The music hit me straight between the eyes," adds McVinnie. "And I knew immediately that a work for organ and speakers constructed on similar lines would prove to be an incredible addition to the repertoire."

So 'Infinity Gradient' was born. Scored for solo organ and 100 speakers in 1-bit audio, and comprising eight continuous movements, it's set to be performed at the Royal Festival Hall in March. The work premiered at Musica Festival, Strasbourg in 2021, but London may offer a definitive take because there are plans to record 'Infinity Gradient', creating – in Perich's own words – an "official document".

But of what? On one level, Perich's work couldn't be simpler. For example, a fire alarm is 1-bit audio, generated by a switching current. The sound is binary, limited, lo-fi. In Perich's music, though, complexity arises from the weaving together of these basic electronic sounds with, in the case of 'Infinity Gradient', McVinnie's keyboard part. What's certainly *not* straightforward is balancing and setting up the 100 speakers.

"I'm going to bring the speakers over to the UK," says Perich. "They all plug into some circuit boards that I've built."

He adds that, conceptually, you can see these speakers as playing a "digital score". Most importantly, Perich is doing all this as part of a live process so that even though the audience is listening in part to pre-programmed sounds, everything is happening in the moment.

These moments should be particularly grand at the Royal Festival Hall, not least because the performance of 'Infinity Gradient' is part of a season celebrating the 70th anniversary of the venue's 7,866-pipe organ. If Perich's self-built circuit board/speaker combinations represent the simplest of instruments, the organ – which McVinnie describes as being of seminal importance in 20th century British organ design and "an ideal instrument for the exploration of contemporary repertoire" – is at the other end of the spectrum. Difficult to maintain, it became unusable by 2000, and needed to be extensively renovated.

Perich is fascinated by the organ more generally because of the connections he sees between 1-bit electronics and the keyboard, and the way he approaches composition.

"I think about music primarily as a pianist in terms of the shapes of different chords," he explains. "Within that, patterns that are possible with the fingering or the hands or shifting chords. I see all that as just different hierarchies of patterns.

"With a piano, there is one-to-one mapping between your finger, the mechanism and the sound, and each key is a different pitch. All this stuff is laid out in very direct physical terms, and that ties into the way I approach the electronic sound. There's this kind of grid of pitches, this grid time, these events – a note turns on, and turns off."

For Perich, the organ further embodies this "very basic" approach to music.

"You can press the key down and it'll sustain forever as long as the mechanism is going," he says.

Both he and McVinnie are also fascinated by the idea that an organ fills a specific space, and that "the instrument is the space". Plus, it's enjoyable to play. As a kid attending boarding school, Perich had access to a chapel organ after hours.

"It was a really fantastic experience to turn off all the lights – so it was literally black – and play. You really kind of lived in that sound and it was fun because I got to experiment. You'd tape some keys down and just play a drone for a long time, then move through the space and hear it."

Perich's childhood might be described as bohemian. His mother ran a gallery. His father, Anton, is a Croatian-American artist who was friends with Andy Warhol. Prefiguring his son's fascination with creating instruments, Anton Perich designed and built an electric painting machine in the 1970s. Both of Perich's parents loved the music of Philip Glass, so he grew up with the idea that "music can be fully about patterns".

As a youngster, Perich says he enjoyed "writing software, having fun, starting little website projects". At this point, his interest in computing didn't intersect with his love of music.

"They were parallel paths," he recalls. "Then in my last year of college, I started learning how to programme circuits and build microchips. A couple of months went by and everything kind of imploded at once. I've been on that trajectory ever since."

Programming code on chips, Perich adds, forces him to think about the structure of his pieces.

"How does the synthesis software work? How am I making my tones? And then how am I arranging that in time? Is this a melodic sequence? Is this generative music? Is it open-ended? Is there randomness? All these questions go into the software because you're designing an instrument at that point."

And if Perich wants to write different music, he simply "changes the code".

We're back to the link between composition and musical instruments as physical objects – a recurring theme over two conversations – and also the Philip Glass influence, about the way patterns can create meaning. But what about the results? What constitutes success? It's revealing that Perich namechecks Japanese visual/sound artist Ryoji Ikeda, famed for using very high tones and for creating works that make listeners ask the age-old question of whether a piece can really be described as music.

"I always feel as though I've really nailed it when the music sounds like you're listening to something and then a truck starts backing up outside," he says. "But then you get a few layers of that beeping and you're like, 'Oh, there's music there'."

Tristan Perich and James McVinnie will perform 'Infinity Gradient' at the Royal Festival Hall on 23 March. Perich's debut recording project for Erased Tapes will be released this summer

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PLANETS ALIGN

LOST SOULS OF SATURN

Reality

HOLOVERSE RESEARCH LABS / SLACKER 85

In astrology, the return of Saturn to the same position it occupied when you were born after nearly 30 years is said to lead to a period of soul-searching. Seth Troxler might not have gone as far as Goldie on 'Saturnz Return' and started composing hour-long symphonies, but the Michigan-born producer did happen to be in his late 20s when he announced the Lost Souls Of Saturn project with veteran New York sound engineer Phil Moffa.

He was clearly beginning to take things seriously, not least because, as a man renowned for being one of the most outspoken figures in clubland, he was making music to talk about philosophy, psychology and Philip K Dick.

The results were not half bad. In fact, considered purely as a techno album, Lost Souls Of Saturn's self-titled 2019 debut is pretty bloody good. Rooted in the ubiquitous 4/4 pulse of Troxler's sets at clubs like Fabric and Berghain, it also ventures into more psychedelic pastures. The thing is though, Lost Souls Of Saturn weren't talking about it as dance music but as a conceptual masterpiece descended from The KLF, The Orb and Sun Ra. And if you want to count yourselves among such exalted company, then not half bad just isn't good enough.

Some more intriguing things emerged around the album, however. There was an epic remix of Lebanese electropop band Mashrou' Leila, which came much closer to being the mind-expanding experience Lost Souls Of Saturn envisaged. There were live shows in art galleries, where the pair ditched drum beats to perform Cluster-style kosmische surrounded by spectacular sci-fi visuals. They also tempted James Holden into turning in his first remix in nearly a decade, his version of 'The Awakening' – clearly a dry run for the astral travelling of last year's incredible 'Imagine This Is A High Dimensional Space Of All Possibilities'.

Lost Souls Of Saturn's second album 'Reality' has more in common with Holden's last LP than their own previous record, and not just because both albums come with a comic. In this case, it's a VR-augmented graphic novel about two "reality hackers" called John and Frank. Both Troxler and Holden became superstar DJs in their late teens and have subsequently strived to escape that pigeonhole. They've not entirely cut the cord tying them to formative house and techno sounds, but they have loosened it to such an extent that they can drift off to wherever they like.

'This Foo' is the only real kick drum-driven dancefloor moment on 'Reality', and its straight-ahead rhythm sounds a bit flat compared to the ups and downs and twists and turns in every other track. By then, we've already traversed the interstellar, 'Bitches Brew'-style live trumpet from Greg Paulus on 'Zorg Arrival', all percolating electronics and clattering live drums, before landing in 'Scram City', a dub techno track that melts down the genre's usual cold aesthetic to become as warm and bubbly as a bathtub on Venus.

Moffa's astounding grasp of sound design means everything feels deep enough to drown in. Take 'Click', where a dubby bassline rolls far beneath frothing IDM beats and singer Lvv Gvn's siren-like vocal.

That immersive quality doesn't always make for comfortable listening though. 'Metro Cafe' is a flat-out terrifying bad trip of abrasive rhythms and sinister voices snarling violent threats, while the murmured conspiracy theories in the eerie 'Realization' also feel like drug-induced paranoia. Now a married father rather than the hedonistic playboy of yore, if these two tracks reflect Troxler's mental state back in the day, you can see why he just says no.

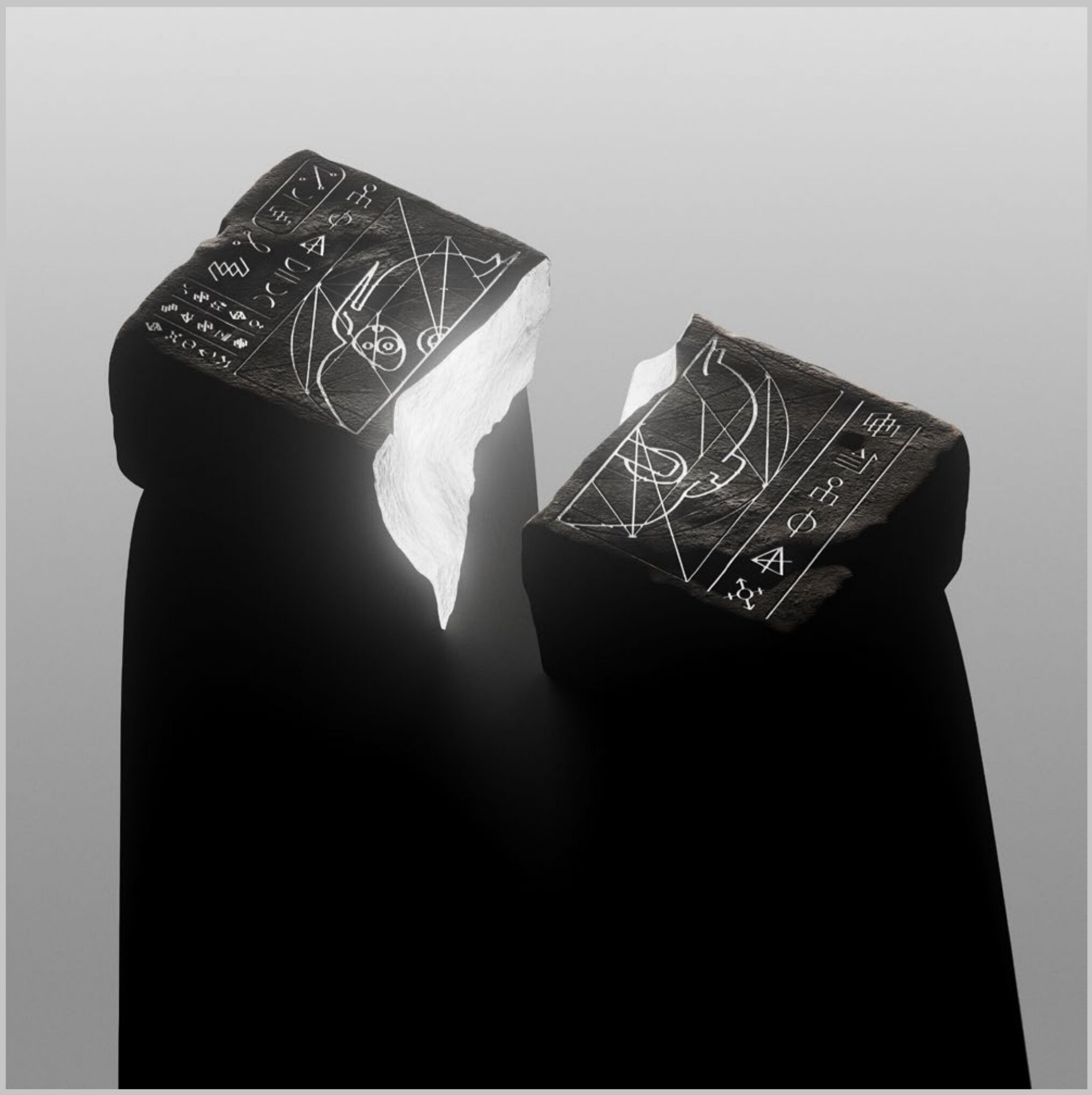
Maybe the reason 'Reality' completely succeeds where 'Lost Souls Of Saturn' sometimes fell short is because Troxler's current domestic contentment means he feels he no longer has to hold onto his old life by keeping one foot in the club. A conjecture given some credence by the closing two tracks, which seem to encapsulate a journey of personal discovery leading to a form of transcendence.

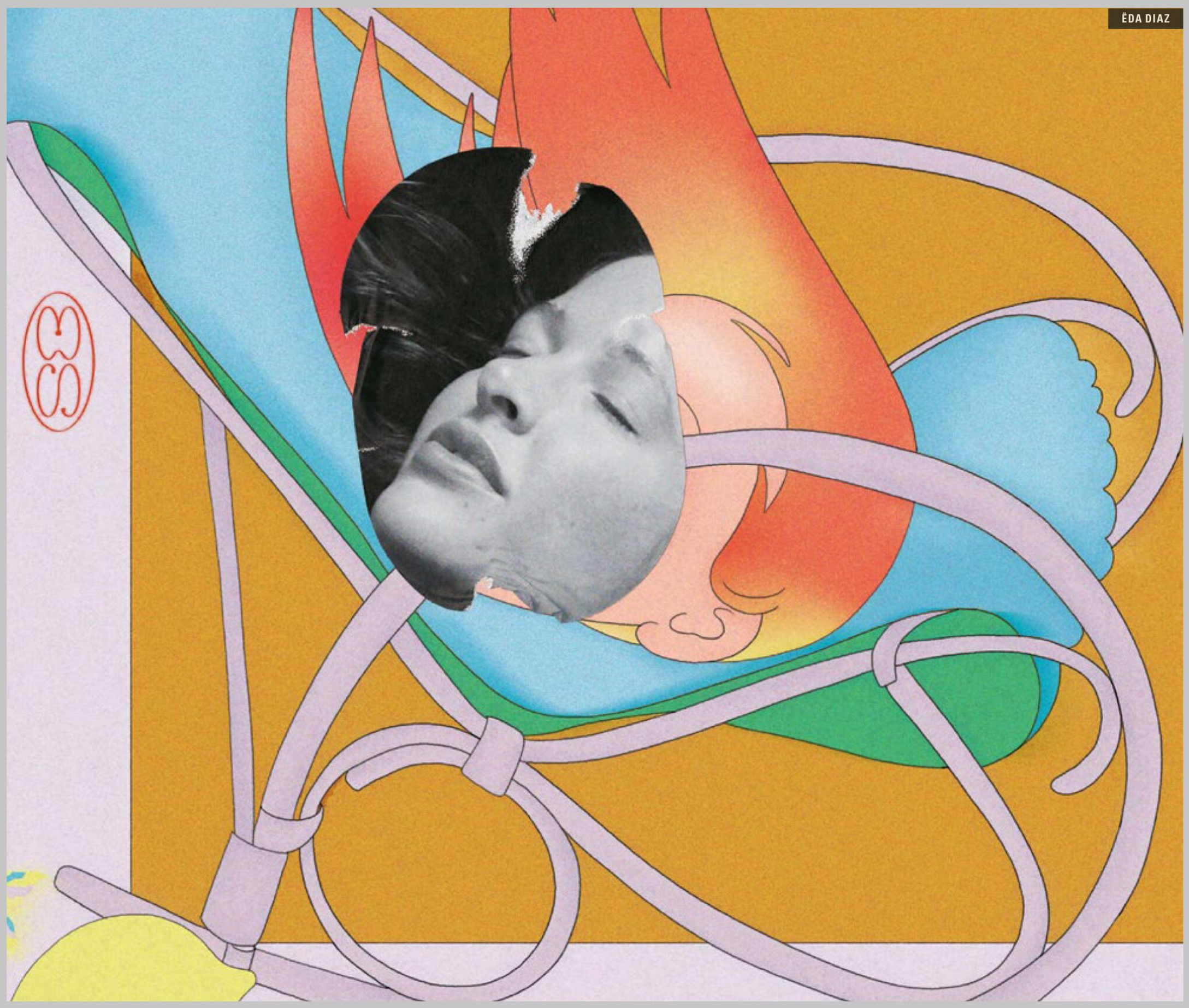
Both feature singers channelling different Davids. On 'Mirage', it's Adam Ohr going Gahan at his most anguished as he ponders, "How did you get yourself / Into this place again?" over stomping gothic synthpop. On 'Lilac Chaser', Protomartyr vocalist Joe Casey sounds like a blissed-out Bowie singing about "an after-image in the void", while synths and guitar feedback drift like a starship passing over the event horizon.

It ends with what resembles a faint radio transmission proclaiming, "It is perseverance that will turn a dream into a reality". In this 'Reality', Lost Souls Of Saturn have made the album they always dreamed they could.

PAUL CLARKE

THE BACK





ËDA DIAZ
Suave Bruta
AIRFONO

The title of this debut album from French-Colombian musician Ëda Diaz references a song by salsa icon Joe Arroyo that resonated through her childhood. Translating as 'Smooth Rough', it perfectly describes the fizzing mixture of traditional Latin music and experimental electronics within. 'Nenita' is a more wonky iteration of Colombian bullerengue music, while tracks such as 'Tiemblas' and 'Al Pelo' shake familiar rhythms into exciting new patterns. Beside the stylistic similarities, what Diaz shares most with Arroyo is a joyous vibrancy, making 'Suave Bruta' impossible to dislike. **ST**

NUNU
User Friendly
99CTS

This is the 99CTS label debut from NUNU, a French producer working in Switzerland. Blending digital and analogue sounds, the general musical area covered is familiar – Autechre at their ballsiest, Boards Of Canada at their most direct, but it's delivered with a character all of its own. The bullying kicks and irresistibly processed and phased breaks of 'DT2' are a definite standout, but 'User Friendly' will appeal to anyone who likes their electronica mashed and scrambled, but still melodically intact. **BW**

MIKE COOPER & PIERRE BASTIEN
Aquapelagos Vol 2: Índico
KEROXEN

English guitarist Mike Cooper and French composer Pierre Bastien dive back into the water for the second part of their 'Aquapelagos' series. The opener, 'Return To Chagos', picks up where the first volume left off, its mixture of seabed chatter and submarine rumble beginning a deeply claustrophobic expedition. Tracks 'Trincomalee' and 'Nicobar' add strangeness and intensity, the sounds becoming increasingly alien and dense under the ocean's briny pressure, before finally collapsing into a kind of nitrogen-in-the- blood fever drone on 'Tuangku' that's unsettling, dark and completely compelling. **ST**

BRION GYSIN
Junk
WEWANTSOUNDS

Beat poet and painter Brion Gysin wasn't strictly a musician, but as the inventor of the Dreamachine – a spinning lamp that causes hallucinations – it seems he could turn his hand to almost anything. Recorded in Paris with Ramuntcho Matta and released a year before Gysin's death in 1986, 'Junk' is a rambunctious melange of jazz-funk and poetry, barked in his smokey transatlantic rasp that sits somewhere between latter-day Bob Dylan and an intoxicated Mark E Smith. The opening track 'Kick' would have been great even before they lured in legendary trumpeter Don Cherry. **JA**

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Music For Waiting Rooms

WAXING CRESCENT

Is it acid house? Or electronica? A psychoactive expedition into the mind of an analogue-obsessed south Londoner? As a matter of fact, it's all three – this is a Made By John release, after all. Squelching basslines and jittery electronics dominate the seven tracks here, which are described by the artist as "music made to assist you while you wait". And with their skittish energy and room-shaking beats, tracks like 'Biggin Jill' and '1989' are bound to make the time fly by. **IB**

ARON & THE JERI JERI BAND

Dama Bëgga Ñibi (I Want To Go Home)

URBAN TROUT

This is an ebullient album, bursting with the sort of positive energy you need to get you through winter. Formed by Stromae collaborator Aron Ottignon, The Jeri Jeri Band is a supergroup of Senegalese musicians, including the multi-instrumentalist griot Bakane Seck and the singer/guitarist Baaba Maal. Traditional instruments mingle with modern production techniques and mbalax-inflected doses of europop on the title track, and also on the irrepressible, pan-infused 'Sunugal'. One to keep on rotation through the chilly and dark winter months. **JA**

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Family Album 2024

BOOMARM NATION

Six years have passed since the last 'Family Album' from Portland, Oregon's Boomarm Nation, a label dedicated to "outernational" dub-dosed techniques. Revived by its founder Gulls at the end of last year, this latest compilation is a welcome return to form from this singular imprint. Top picks include Ulrich Troyer's sedate 10-minute dub excursion 'Ancient Atoll – Extended Version', the mysterious Natural Magic's pastoral, downtempo ambient piece 'Lindt', or the sunlight-glazed 'Terrarium' from esteemed Portland musician Strategy. **FH**

DAVID WALLRAF

The Commune Of Nightmares

KARLRECORDS

The surrealist technique "cadavre exquis" ("exquisite corpse") involves blindfolded participants contributing to a drawing, resulting in grotesque and outlandish images. Hamburg's David Wallraf deploys this technique via sound, building lurching, gothic soundscapes from cassette tape loops – some found in his own vault, others found on the street. 'He Bit His Tongue In His Sleep' is a mixture of subterranean rumble and half-heard growl, while 'They Sidestep Extinction' recalls Tanning Salon's 'Dream Castle' and exudes a low-key, hypnagogic dread. An oppressive elixir of dungeon ambient. **ST**

JESS BRETT
A Storm Of A Woman
BANDCAMP

Jess Brett's debut album feels like a time capsule from the fertile post-punk meets electronic pop testing ground. With a powerful voice and reverential, 1981-vintage monophonic melodies, key tracks like 'Off My Drugs' and 'I Love The Sharks' have an arresting, emotional immediacy and poise. Dealing with themes of mental anguish and damaged relationships, darkness lurks in the lyrics of the standout 'I'll Do It Again', offsetting the smoothness of Brett's synth structures. Bold and brilliant. **MS**

ALTO ARIA
Limerence
RHIZOME

The latest album from Danish musician Alto Aria is one for broken hearts. Across 13 compositions she softly reminisces on love and loss, and although plaintive piano and mournful violin accompany Aria's bright but heavy voice (as on the gloomy highlight 'To Keep My Own Dream'), the variance of musical styles here is a hallmark of the record. Another standout is 'Angels In The Valley', featuring Laura Cecilie, which takes post-club influences on a percussive journey of hard bargaining to the end of the romantic road. **FH**

CRISP WOLVES
We Too Are Crisp Wolves
PSI-FREE SWEDISH BRAND

Crisp Wolves are musician (and ES contributor) Scott Blixen and his talented 10-year-old son, Kasper. Together they've crafted a mixture of madcap electro and vocoder-infused revelry on this, their debut album, which was inspired by their shared love of The Human League, Giorgio Moroder and Patrick Cowley. The title track, 'We Too Are Crisp Wolves', is maddeningly moreish, while the likes of 'Underwater Wolves' and '[Mountain] Music' are uncannily poignant. We take no responsibility if you start howling at the moon after listening, though. **IB**

ASHTREJINKINS
It's Trash Now
LEAVING

The music of AshTreJinkins is hip hop in the loosest possible sense. On his latest and most high-profile release yet, the LA producer and rapper concocts an experimental and abstract set of electronic instrumentals. Tracks such as 'Drug Depressed' might share hip hop's tempo, but the beats become lolloping, mechanistic textures, while on 'Young Old Head (There For The Changes)' astral bleeps patrol a liminal synth zone. Think Flying Lotus, but much further out. **BM**

ALVIDREZ
Antiphon
MEMORIALS OF DISTINCTION

"The holy is not a thing to be achieved but a thing that is already here – if only we look close enough," claims Californian artist Alvidrez. Their debut album, inspired by their new base in Scotland, is a thing of remarkable beauty. Reckoning with lapsed faith and bathed in heavenly electronics, choral vocals and sublime piano and organ, tracks like 'Hymn For The Corner' and 'Garden Of Forgotten Things' strike you right in the heart, recalling both the spectral dreampop of Cindy Lee's 'What's Tonight To Eternity' and the textural soundscapes of This Mortal Coil and Cocteau Twins. Unmissable. **CF**

ANNIE ARIES
It's Not Quiet In The Void
EVEREST

Swiss-Philippine composer and modular artist Annie Aries has made an album that certainly fits its title. It starts off in a kind of void that'll be familiar to fans of isolationism, with 'Abyss' all sustain and echoing synth chords. By the time 'JJG4260N' begins to rain down its distorted shards, the void seems all too close and anything but quiet. After that, even the more spacious moments like 'Springs' seem less an oasis of calm and more like the calm before the storm. Terrifying at times, but never boring. **BW**

INFESTA
Passerella
DEE DEE'S PICKS

Emanating from the unlikely location of a cabin studio on the shore of Switzerland's Lake Lugano, this is a superb debut from Basel's Marco Guglielmetti, aka Infesta. 'Passerella' sounds like an obscure early 1980s minimal wave gem channelling, by turns, the likes of Kraftwerk, Suicide, early New Order and Oppenheimer Analysis. Guglielmetti carries plenty of that essential post-punk contra-attitude, and tracks like 'Movimento' prove irresistible with their Italian vocals, icily measured, primitive-sounding synth chords and driving basslines. Recommended. **CG**

BREEZE
Sour Grapes
HAND DRAWN DRACULA

Originally a vehicle for the solo work of Toronto producer Josh Korody, Breeze have produced their first album as a five-piece. 'Sour Grapes' is touted as a return to the group's 1990s-inspired roots, but to most ears the distorted vocals and pealing guitars will be more reminiscent of post-punk acts like Magazine, with highlights 'Agitated' and 'Have You Ever Suffered' sounding like unused tracks from 'The Correct Use Of Soap'. A fruitful new direction for an outfit who already seem set on a path of constant reinvention. **IB**

LARYSSA KIM – PHOTO: PAULINE COLLEU

LARYSSA KIM

Contezza

CITY TRACKS

Laryssa Kim is an Italo-Congolese singer and producer currently based in Brussels. Her debut album takes us a long way from the Belgian capital, though, driving electronic soul into a deep, dark forest, with hooting owls, rainstorm samples and shimmering synths. Kim's effects-laden vocals are full of awe and wonder – on 'Voeu – Canto Votivo' her voice is manipulated so that it swoops and dives like a swallow, while on 'Les Amants Transparents – 1H' she nestles into a sound bed of her own backing vocals. Heady, enthralling stuff. **WS**

LETTERS FROM MOUSE

Clota

SUBEXOTIC

Clota? The Celtic goddess of the River Clyde, and Steven "Letters From Mouse" Anderson honours her with this soothingly modular tribute. His 2022 album 'Tarbolton Bachelors Club' was a homage to Robert Burns' regular 18th century hangout, and 'Clota' is a similarly ambient celebration of Scotland's quieter corners. So the woozy tinkles of 'Frogspawn' surrender to the lilting piano of 'Bowling Greens And Tennis Courts', before hissing traffic and birdsong lead us to the fractured arpeggios of 'Habitual Joy'. An album of soft sunshine and gently clearing skies. **BF**

POLYGONIA

Da Nao Tian Gong

MIDGAR

While the music of Munich-based producer Polygonia (Lindsey Wang) is as exquisitely crafted as that of artists like Marco Shuttle, it's hard to imagine many other deep techno producers making a record based on a cartoon monkey. Inspired by the Chinese animation film of the same name from her childhood, tracks such as 'Jin Dou Yun' and 'Disha Shu' are coloured with intricate details that really come alive in your headphones at home, while also being powered by propulsive rhythms perfectly calibrated for when you're heads-down on the dancefloor. **PC**

LAMIN FOFANA

Lamin Fofana & The Doudou Ndiaye Rose Family

HONEST JON'S

Sierra Leone musician Lamin Fofana drives the synths, while the Doudou Ndiaye Rose Family, a group born from the talented bloodline of a legendary Senegalese percussionist, build an undulating road of shifting rhythms. The first three pieces are almost dub style, but the undeniable pinnacle is the closing track 'Toco SOS', where all the elements introduced meld into a singular and transcendent 12 minute-long composition. This is a slab of heavenly ascension mediated through acoustic beats and electronics. **FH**

SAD MAN
Now
BANDCAMP

'Now' sees Andrew Spackman reclaiming his Sad Man alias after hiding out as The Dark Jazz Project. While the hyperactivity and left turns that characterised his earlier albums are here in abundance, the focus of key tracks like 'Go Egg' and 'The Worm' is a delicious headlong dive into danceable (but fragmented) electro territory. Elsewhere, the inclusion of rolling pianos on 'Spice' cuts through a nest of breakbeats to offer a wobbly, bluesy swagger. Turn that smile upside down – it's a welcome and oh-so-wonky return for the Sad Man. **MS**

ALESSANDRO ALESSANDRONI
Alessandroni Proibito Vol 2 (Music From Red Light Films 1976-1980)
FOUR FLIES

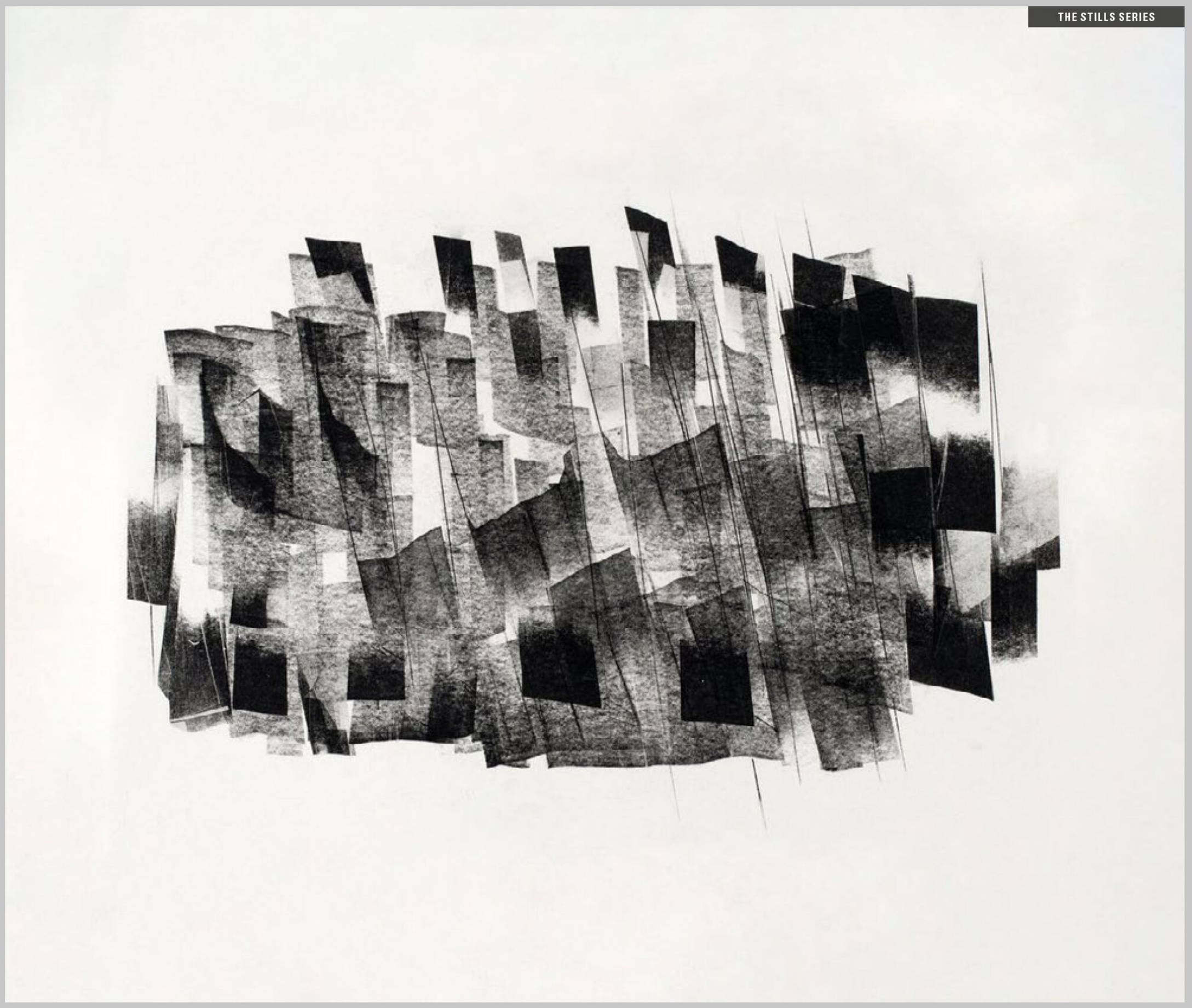
Although he's arguably best-known as the man who lent his whistling talents to a number of Sergio Leone's spaghetti western soundtracks, Alessandro Alessandroni was also the godfather of Italian library music. This is the second volume in a series that showcases his compositions for soft-core erotic films, and it's every bit as tantalisingly seductive as the first. It all evokes a lip-licking, seedy sort of glamour, from the slinky groove of 'Tahiti Joint' to the barefaced swagger of 'Ragazza Di Campagna'. **IB**

PREGOBLIN
Pregoblin II
STRAP ORIGINALS

Alex Sebley used to be in Fat White Family, and his misleadingly titled solo debut album shares his old band's queasy DNA and much of their maverick defiance. Indeed, you're often not sure when (and if) Sebley is taking the piss – the way 'Everybody's Ill (At The Moment) Part 2' eases into a muso's funk jam could well be an in-joke, while 'Wimpy' is a woozy comedown ballad about taking a date to the titular burger bar. Baffling, bonkers and at times, perversely brilliant. **WS**

NAILAH HUNTER
Lovegaze
FAT POSSUM

A harpist fascinated by nature and fairy tales, Californian Nailah Hunter spun new age instrumentals on 2020's 'Spells' EP and on the beguiling 30-minute composition 'Forest Dwelling' from 2022. Hunter's debut album makes much more use of her enchanting voice on tracks like 'Into The Sun', and her harp is dusted with subtle electronics as enticing as a gingerbread house. Lyrics like "I dream of beheadings / And goose-feather beddings" suggest something darker lurking within, while slo-mo rhythms give the album a satisfying crunch. Witch-hop, anybody? **PC**



VARIOUS ARTISTS
The Stills Series
STRING AND TINS

Now here's a compilation with an interesting premise. Contributors were asked to select a piece of art displayed in Tate Britain and create an accompanying piece of music, as if the artwork represented a still from a full scene. As you might imagine, the results are varied and unexpected. The highlight is Adam Smyth's breathlessly elegant, orchestral take on 'Horse Frightened By A Lion', the simultaneous immediacy and richness of which seems to bring George Stubbs' exquisite oil painting to life before your very eyes. **IB**

LUST PATTERN
Stand, Scatter
DARK ENTRIES

Bristol's Ryan Ambridge (aka Lust Pattern) surfaces with four long-form cuts of "deviant electrowave" that pulse and throb with after-dark edge. Built from improvised jams, and imbued with echoes of post-punk, squelchy Drexciyan vibes and future-facing funk, it's cracking stuff that really goes through the gears. The skittering 'Choreography' is thrillingly uptempo space disco with all bleeps to the max, but it's the blistering motorik groove of 'No Floor' that properly hits home, like Suicide at their dissonant peak. **VI**

ELIF YALVAÇ
Mælifell
MÖLLER

The Turkish composer Elif Yalvaç raises her 2023 collaborative album 'My Heart Of Noise' to another level of abstraction here. 'Mælifell' is a reinterpretation of that LP by Icelandic label Möller Records' international roster of experimental artists. Among them, Iceland's Hjalti Steinn Sigurðarson, Norway's ILKAMA and Turkey's Metehan Köktürk carry us on an unrelenting quest through forbidding landscapes – a squalling volcanic snowstorm on 'Orchestra Of Light Remix' to glitchy, beat-driven stellar visions on 'Taiga II Remix'. An infinite starscape made uncannily real. **CG**

KENN HARTWIG
Gameboys & Pedals
ANUNAKI TABLA

No prizes for guessing what Berlin's Kenn Hartwig used to create his first solo album. Employing a variety of sound-producing programs for the humble Nintendo handheld fed through a rack of effects, the nine short tracks include springy 8-bit sounds arranged into grubby, noisy, unpredictable clusters or wonky melodic layers. Some of the best tracks, like 'I Can't Cast That Here', are more heavily reliant on grainy textures, offering a striking, lo-fi take on ambient sound design. Playful and nostalgic. **MS**

JULIA GOVOR
Laika And Ulka Were Here
SEMANTICA

US techno producer Julia Govor knows how to push the boundaries all right. Here she guides us on an intergalactic journey with her friend Ulka and dog Laika (named after the first animal in space), but this is no playful ambient cartoon voyage. Instead, 'Laika And Ulka Were Here' comprises a blisteringly intricate sequence of cinematic sci-fi bangers fit to grace the PA system of any self-respecting bunker club. Belters like 'Close To The Sun' or 'Space Dust, Born Trust' spin and careen at explosive speed, right to the outer limits. **CG**

AUSTRA
Swan Song (Original Score)
DOMINO

Katie Stelmanis' first film score, for Chelsea McMullan's documentary about ballet icon Karen Kain, steers expertly clear of cliches. Using just a Juno-106, a Mellotron and her own voice, the Canadian musician manages to weave elements of Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake' into these 14 tracks, creating something that's at times austere ('Rothbart'), often poignant ('Karen's Reflection'), but also thoroughly modern. And even if you know nothing about Kain (or indeed, ballet) it's moving enough to make you want to seek out the documentary. Job well done. **WS**

AMITURE
Mother Engine
DOTS PER INCH MUSIC

Jack Whitescarver and Coco Goupil return as Amiture with the follow-up to their synth-heavy 2021 debut 'The Beach'. This album is much darker and weightier than its predecessor, with the unsettling apprehension of 'Billy's Dream' and the prickly guitar roars of 'Baby' evoking the likes of fellow New Yorkers, Sonic Youth. A sense of individuality is still very much at play though, particularly in Whitescarver's vocals, which billow over rattling rhythms and guttural basslines like thick, twisting smoke trails across a cloud-filled sky. **IB**

HELADO NEGRO
Phasor
4AD

Ecuadorian-American musician Roberto Carlos Lange came to the attention of electronic music fans when RVNG Intl reissued his album 'Private Energy' in 2017. Singing in English and Spanish, his music beautifully fuses otherworldly electronica with the more earthy Latin influences he grew up with. On 'Phasor' there are a myriad of jerky, hip-swinging beats, plus Lange's most naggingly catchy song yet – the wonderfully propulsive 'LFO (Lupe Finds Oliveros)', a homage to deep listening exponent Pauline Oliveros and 1950s Fender factory technician Lupe Lopez. **JA**

FER FRANCO

Ritos De Paso

BANDCAMP

On his debut album, Guatemalan producer Fer Franco traverses the gaps between rock and electronic music and, on occasion, imperceptibly splices the two together. This six-track journey takes us from the half krautrock, half garage-surf opener 'Ya No Vivo Aquí' (with heavenly vocals provided by fellow Guatemalan composer Mabe Fratti) to the hazy, free-form sprawl of closing tune 'Nunca Termina', which sounds like a shoegazey star collapsing in on itself.

In between, we get the slow motion techno chug of 'Tu Señal', the dreamily symphonic synths and plaintive bass picking of 'Eliminar Lo Innecesario', the woozy atmospheres and burned sonic edges of 'Otras Voces' and the gnarlier, angular grooves of 'Asumir Forma'. As well as Mabe Fratti's contributions, the album also features Alex Hentze, Mexico City's I La Católica (Hector Tosta) and Gary Burton of Manchester group Cosmos Collapse. The whole thing is rich and confident in its execution, with zero fucks given to what might fit in which pigeonhole. Just how we like it, in other words. **BW**

LAETITIA SADIER

Rooting For Love

DUOPHONIC SUPER 45S

More than 30 years after she first appeared on the scene, Laetitia Sadier is still evolving, even if her creative modus operandi has largely stayed the same. Sadier has always analysed the human condition from her own perspective, with the deepening crisis of capitalism as backdrop. That's still the case on 'Rooting For Love', a snapshot as revealing as a Rembrandt self-portrait with all its dramatic illumination and deep shadows. Yet, Sadier brings more external stimuli into her orbit than the Dutch master, presenting the lessons she learns along the way as facets of her own artistry.

There are traces of Aksak Maboul's operatic 'Une Aventure De VV (Songspiel)' on the opener 'Who + What', and on 'The Dash' there's the bossa nova of Brazilian psychedelic outfit Mombojó, who she joined forces with as Modern Cosmology on 2023's 'What Will You Grow Now?'. It all makes for a varied, quixotic sixth solo album, with Sadier even employing the cut-up technique to mingle thematic ideas for a thrillingly wayward adventure. Fans may hanker for a new Stereolab album, but it seems churlish to ask when she's making records this accomplished. **JA**

THE BODY AND DIS FIG

Orchards Of A Futile Heaven

THRILL JOCKEY

The Body seem to believe that hell can be found in other people, although in a different sense to Jean-Paul Sartre. While their own albums, like 2013's 'Christs, Redeemers', have been noisy infernos, it's in the Portland-based duo's work with other artists such as The Haxan Cloak, BIG|BRAVE and OAA that they have achieved truly diabolical dimensions.

On this occasion, Berlin producer and vocalist Dis Fig is stepping through the gates of hell with them. On 'To Walk A Higher Path' her voice resembles a fallen angel amid mangled electronic screams, things reaching a really disturbing climax on 'Coils Of Kaa' as she howls "I don't want to behave", like someone locked in a cell while zombies batter at the door. They dwell in a similar musical demimonde as both Forest Swords' 'Engravings' or Coil, and a long lineage of apocalyptic art including the novels of Cormac McCarthy and the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. For those brave enough, 'Orchards Of A Futile Heaven' is a garden of unearthly delights. **PC**

KALI MALONE
All Life Long
IDEOLOGIC ORGAN

Stockholm-based Kali Malone is increasingly being recognised as one of the most startling new talents in minimalist electroacoustic composition. On the evidence of this, her sixth solo LP, it's for good reason. Each of the 12 tracks carries the exquisite, spectrally hued power of four different organs built between the 15th and 17th centuries. It's all augmented by the rich, subtly processed textures of one of Malone's vintage ARP synths.

There are stunning contributions from quintet Anima Brass (see the hypnotising 'No Sun To Burn') and the voices of male choir The Macadam Ensemble (overwhelmingly emotive on 'Slow Of Faith'). The vast space between the organ chords and the seemingly infinite, resonating drone of the chords themselves lends a striking ambient quality throughout. On 'All Life Long (For Organ)', Malone suspends the flow of time and delivers us to an elemental, meditative space as still as a deep-winter forest. This is secular spiritualism that feels both sincere and thrillingly contemporary. **CG**

OFFICE FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT
Doing. Is. Thinking.
BEX-POP

Fancy getting your ducks in a row and thinking outside the box? Trevor Deeble has done exactly that. Once half of the folk duo Trevor Moss and Hannah-Lou, he has since reassessed his core values to become the motivational guru behind Office For Personal Development, a splendidly ripe piss-take of evangelical corporate culture.

The music is magnificent, evoking the synthpop glories of Heaven 17 or Furniture. But Deeble has also struck a canny lyrical balance. Songs that could have been stuffed with knowing references to fax machines are instead heartfelt vignettes of isolation and delusion. So strident odes to self-improvement like 'You Are In Control' ("It takes a lifetime of dedication / To achieve even mediocrity") are countered elsewhere by worrying vulnerability. "Lately, I've been thinking / That I am Jesus," sings Deeble on the bleepy banger that is 'Do It All Over Again'. "It's fun going up and down / At the supermarket / When you think that you're the son of God." Going forward, this could be a game-changer. **BF**

SCANNER
Alchemeia
ALLTAGSMUSIK

At some point, serious crate diggers decided that some of the most amazing samples you could fish for came from those discarded library records of the early 1960s. But alongside the artists who were suddenly making hay off these discoveries was a clutch of straight-up vinyl collectors who also dug the sounds of ersatz funk and groovy pop synthtronica these albums offered up.

Robin Rimbaud, aka Scanner, must have been among them, because the 15 tracks that comprise 'Alchemeia' reflect the love of someone who's spent a fair amount of time steeped in the library genre. These pieces were partly put together with modular gear, vintage effects and tape units in order to truly nail the requisite vibes. Among the standouts are the plinky-plonky 'Sestinea', the warmly overdriven 'Comtesea', and the opener, 'Chimaera'. That last one in particular does double duty in setting up the journey, as well as highlighting a bridge between those long-lost tracks of the corduroy era and 1996-style Richard D James. **JS**

RURAL TAPES

Contact

SMUGGLER MUSIC

Living in a remote part of Norway with a barn full of esoteric musical instruments, Arne Kjelsrud Mathisen stockpiles zithers and Mellotrons rather than shotguns and tins of beans. Written as a reaction against a world hurtling into an automated future, his third Rural Tapes album seems preoccupied with end times, and Mathisen emphasises the essential human touch in his music by producing everything on analogue gear.

'Patchwork' opens things at full throttle with motorik kosmische that's so Neu! it nearly makes it from Norway to Düsseldorf in 11 minutes flat, and the spaghetti western guitars of 'Run Rapid' also canter along at quite a clip. Things are more meandering elsewhere, with the bucolic drones of 'By Dawn' nestled among quaint interludes like the wonky music box waltz of 'Opus'. The highlight, 'Waves', features recordings of people recalling joyful summers and family pets, over meandering organ and acoustic guitar – a sepia-toned image of the world before it began collapsing around our ears. **PC**

RAFAEL TORAL

Spectral Evolution

MOIKAI

The sleeve of Rafael Toral's 'Spectral Evolution' features a pristine photograph of a small bird, close-up and in vivid detail, recalling the kind of image usually found inside a nature calendar or the pages of a birdwatching book. So, it's reasonable to think that the album might sound equally documentarian and precise, with crisp evocations of verdant nature that are scattered with chirps of avian chatter.

Instead, what the Portuguese musician creates is something completely illusory and delightful, juxtaposing the straightforward imagery of its cover. Comprising a near 43-minute soundscape – delivered as one continuous whole, but separated into 12 movements – 'Spectral Evolution' depicts the textures and rhythms of nature with an almost cinematic scope. 'Changes' feels like the flutter of a wing dissected in slow-motion intricacy, while 'Descending' swoops the mixture into gorgeous thermal decline. The magic is in Toral's delicately affecting cycles, which succeed in extracting graceful, almost revelatory beauty from the world's ubiquitous sources. **ST**

BASIL KIRCHIN

Assignment Kirchin

TRUNK

Jonny Trunk digs out yet another gem from the Basil Kirchin tape archive. Featuring two previously unreleased 1968 soundtracks from the esteemed bandleader-turned-composer, it offers yet more insight into Kirchin's esoteric and quirky sound world. The first half of the album – the score to a movie ('Assignment K') about a toymaker who also doubles as a spy – is steeped in lounge jazz, its ornate flourishes breezy and dashing, like John Barry or Laurie Johnson properly cutting loose. 'AK 9' stands out with its tricksy organ fills and noodling funk groove, evoking the sort of suave spy flick that was de rigueur in the late 1960s.

The score to 'The Strange Affair' – a grubby crime drama starring Michael York as a policeman in swinging London – delves into slightly more experimental hues. The gorgeously mellow 'SA 6' in particular, with its jaunty orchestral passages and playful rhythms, is a testament to Kirchin's skilful arrangement and glorious attention to detail. Wonderful. **VI**

LOU REED

Hudson River Wind Meditations

LIGHT IN THE ATTIC

Reissue shows rock pioneer's softer side

In Lou Reed's twilight years, long after the white heat of The Velvet Underground had dissipated, he found a sense of peace that his younger self would have railed against furiously. This change came chiefly through the meditative nature of tai chi, which he practised until he died in 2013.

Reed recorded 'Hudson River Wind Meditations' with producer Hal Willner in 2006, primarily as an accompaniment to his personal daily tai chi practice. The pieces were inspired by breathing techniques and the breezes blowing along the Hudson River outside the New York apartment he shared with his wife, Laurie Anderson.

The concept borrowed heavily from Erik Satie's notion of "furniture music", interpreted by Reed as "music to play in the background of life – to replace the everyday cacophony".

The album was originally released in 2007 by spiritual healing imprint Sounds True, and rapidly became unavailable. This new reissue from Light In The Attic rescues Reed's final solo album from relative obscurity.

Most of 'Hudson River Wind Meditations' is taken up with two 30-minute compositions. 'Move Your Heart' consists of a gently undulating tone that runs for the entire duration of the piece. Occasionally it changes pitch and speed, designed to evoke the idea of falling deeper into a meditative state, your breathing slowing as you become increasingly more centred.

Its counterpart, 'Find Your Note', is structured from two discrete components – a low-frequency bass pulse and a high ringing sound, both of which fluctuate along separate paths that intersect at sporadic intervals. These two frequencies recall John Cage's descriptions of visiting an anechoic chamber. Instead of the silence he expected, he became acutely focused on the sounds of his body – the lows being blood in circulation and the highs, the nervous system. Any meditative practice asks you to listen to your body. 'Find Your Note' is Reed doing exactly that.

It may feel at odds with Reed's most visceral work as a solo artist or when fronting the Velvets, but 'Hudson River Wind Meditations' is as powerful an insight into Reed's beliefs and motivations toward the end of his life as 'I'm Waiting For The Man' was in 1967.

More than anything, however, it stands up as a beautiful vehicle for anyone in need of peace and comfort amid the tempestuous clatter of modern life.

MAT SMITH

Shop Talk

Australian musician **Karen Vogt** guides us through her record collection

Hello Karen! Can you tell us a bit about your favourite record store?

"I stumbled across a charming second-hand record shop in Rennes, France recently. It was raining, and I was lured in by the €1 crates out front full of old soul, disco and funk vinyls.

"But my favourite store is Greville Records in Prahran in Melbourne, Australia. Many moons ago I lived nearby, and it was a thrill to find treasures there, see a new release of a band I loved or order an overseas import. I hear it's still going, and is run by the same lovely guy, Phil."

How do you dig for new music?

"Back in the day, I heard new music through friends playing at house parties, on the radio or at clubs. These days, I love finding things by accident, but mostly by following my own curiosity. I am usually fairly good with having a quick listen and knowing if I might be into it or not.

"I listen for a mood, textures, atmosphere and, most importantly, emotion. Bandcamp is good for digging around or rediscovering older music too. There is so much out there that it's impossible to keep up and you have to just go at your own pace."

Have you ever purchased a record based on the cover art alone?

"I used to borrow CDs from the library based on the cover art, and I was lucky enough to have friends who had some awesome vinyl, CD and cassette collections that I could flick through. I could never afford to have a physical record collection.

"I remember seeing the cover for Primal Scream's 'Screamadelica' and I was so intrigued to listen to it because I couldn't figure out what kind of music it might be. The artwork drew me in because it was so unusual!"

What's one hard-to-find album that you'd love to get your hands on?

"I would love a copy of the Factory Records release 'The Return Of The Durutti Column'. It would be wild to see, and hold, the original sandpaper cover. I love the music, but also the rebellious spirit of doing something different."

Finally, tell us about your record collection?

"My collection is mostly digital because that's how I listen to music. I don't have the budget, or space, for physical items. I have a few CDs, cassettes and vinyls, but most are from my musician friends who made them. My collection is all over the place and spread between a few hard drives and my phone.

"The albums I cherish most are the ones I have from friends that I listened to before they released them, or have a special physical copy of. Each album usually has a little story behind it that is meaningful to me and takes me back to a particular time and a feeling."

Karen Vogt's 'Waterlog' is is out now on Nite Hive

Buried Treasure

LOVE AND ROCKETS

Hot Trip To Heaven

BEGGARS BANQUET / AMERICAN, 1994

For some reason, at the tail end of last year, the song 'So Alive' got lodged in my head. Released in 1989, the upbeat dance-pop tune was Love And Rockets' best-known track and their biggest hit. But it also led me to wondering what came next for the band who were formed from the ashes of goth post-punkers Bauhaus.

The answer is 'Hot Trip To Heaven', which came out in 1994, a whole five years after the self-titled fourth LP that spawned 'So Alive'. Having taken a break following an intense period of chart success, members Daniel Ash, David J and Kevin Haskins began working on this, their fifth album, inspired by the music that the likes of The Orb, Leftfield and Orbital were making in the early 90s.

It should have been easy – they had a hefty fanbase, as well as the backing of Rick Rubin's US label, American – but it wasn't. 'Hot Trip To Heaven' went over like tumbleweed. Too electronic for the rock kids, and too rock for the electronic kids. But 30 years after its release, it's worth revisiting this underrated bit of peak-era UK electronica.

For starters, the 14-minute-plus opener 'Body And Soul' is actually pretty damn good. It's got searing psychedelic guitars, tripped-out synths, a groovy beat that could have come straight from 'Screamadelica' and fuzzy vocal FX. This approach – grab all the best bits from the 90s acid house boom and stick them in a blender – basically underscores 'Hot Trip To Heaven'.

The second track ,'Ugly', is equally easy to get into, a slinking diss-track with wailing, world music-tinted backing vocals from Egyptian-Belgian singer Natacha Atlas. Likewise with the third track, the narcotic slow-burner, 'Trip And Glide'.

Then there's the pulsing, smokey 'This Heaven', like peeling back a velvet curtain and descending into some darkened opium den. And on it goes. Before you know it, an hour has passed, the trip is over, and it's hard to understand why the album received such a cold shoulder in the 90s.

Beggars Banquet, who originally released the album in the UK, put out an expanded vinyl reissue of 'Hot Trip To Heaven' last year as part of their Beggars Arkive series. It's well worth seeking out. And if a pub trivia quiz ever asks you to name a Love And Rockets song that isn't 'So Alive', at least now you'll have an answer.

CLAIRE FRANCIS

KIM GORDON

The Collective

MATADOR

Superbly seismic second solo effort

Kim Gordon's boundless creativity has seen her expand her edgy multidisciplinary artistry in all directions of late, through painting, dance, fashion, film and literature. As well as her best-selling memoir, she's also exhibited her visual art at leading New York gallery 303, given a star turn in Gus Van Sant's 2018 movie 'Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far On Foot', and appeared onstage with choreographer Dimitri Chamblas.

No wonder then that this is only Gordon's second solo LP post-Sonic Youth. It follows her lauded 2019 debut 'No Home Record', and again sees her collaborate with producer du jour Justin Raisen, who has worked with the likes of John Cale, Yves Tumor and Yeah Yeah Yeahs. Once again, the pair have conjured up another typically uncompromising, thoroughly on-the-money thriller.

'The Collective' takes its cues from both the underground dancefloor and the sweaty no wave riot stage. It throws in a canny, drum machine-heavy trap aesthetic early on, just to make it abundantly clear that this is no exercise in nostalgic reputation-trading.

"On this record, I wanted to express the absolute craziness I feel around me right now," says Gordon. "This is a moment when nobody really knows what truth is, when facts don't necessarily sway people… it made me want to disrupt."

Narcotic malevolence reigns supreme across the album, right from the squalling, death metal infused-opener 'Bye Bye'. Its sneering list of some of the unsolicited images and scenes that race across her retina while cruising LA's mean streets or scrolling on Instagram set us up for the speedy trip that ensues.

'I Don't Miss My Mind' is a careering, coruscating and deeply disorienting beauty. The outstanding 'I'm A Man' witheringly dismantles the contemporary brand of yoga bun-sporting, lumberjack-chic male vanity that co-opts anything it wants into its empty narcissism. Both channel the warped, filthy peak of 1980s alternative – think Butthole Surfers, Big Stick or Swans – filtered through a contemporary prism of tight digital precision.

Elsewhere, the abstract art-pop experimentalism of 'Psychedelic Orgasm' proves to be a profoundly expressive winner, shot through with the kind of visionary inventiveness that takes your breath away. Triumphant.

CARL GRIFFIN

AURORA ENGINE – PHOTO: LAURENCE WINRAM

AURORA ENGINE

Secret Knock

BANDCAMP

"Tiny hands, tiny feet, a tiny little hairbrush to keep her neat," sings Edinburgh's Deborah Shaw at the beginning of this strange, glacial album. "I've been working so hard to keep things small." It's a record of delightful contrasts. Shaw's vocals are half husky Geordie, half ethereal pixie, and her own mellifluous harp-playing is elegantly woven around electronic fizzles. All showcased immaculately on 'Miniature Self', a resigned sigh at the reductive measures women are expected to take to find acceptance.

Her lyrical concerns are eclectic too. 'Roxy Ryder' is an anthemic, string-laden apology from a guilty porn addict, while 'Scaling The Walls' laments the lonely existence of a geologist obsessing over a rare mineral. But it's Shaw's own battle with anxiety that is most affecting. 'Pink Noise' is her restless, harp-driven struggle with insomnia, and 'Keenia' the imaginary friend she invents to find comfort. "We could have a secret knock and live on sherbert lemon drops / Running, stampeding, howling in the dark." Alluringly dark magic abounds throughout this splendid collection. **BF**

RAFAEL ANTON IRISARRI

Midnight Colours

BLACK KNOLL EDITIONS

Created in the shadow of the Manhattan Project nuclear programme in the 1940s, the Doomsday Clock imagines human-induced apocalypse when the clock strikes 12. The closer mankind comes to self-annihilation, the closer the big hand moves to that theoretical hour. In 2017, the end time read two-and-a-half minutes to midnight, the nearest it had been since the hydrogen bomb-testing of the USA and Soviet superpowers in the early 50s. That same year, the American composer Rafael Anton Irisarri crystallised the anticipation and dread into a series of illusory soundscapes called 'Midnight Colours'.

The opening tracks, 'The Clock' and 'Falling Curtain', consist of slowly shifting drone motifs, latticed with a fuzz and radioactive hum that recalls William Basinski's 'The Disintegration Loops'. While tracks like 'A Ruptured Tranquillity' and 'Circuits' are more explicitly doom-soaked than Basinski's piece, both squeeze their end-times gloom from swathes of glowing, droning electronics. Given that January 2024 saw the Doomsday Clock remain at its closest ever position of 90 seconds to midnight, Irisarri's work carries a particularly sobering weight. **ST**

DAVID BEST

Message – Send – Failure

BANDCAMP

'Message – Send – Failure' is the first solo album from Fujiya & Miyagi co-founder David Best. Produced with his frequent collaborator Julian Tardo, these tracks share many of the reference points that have always made F&M so compelling, from Italo disco and krautrock influences, to Best's oblique observations on modern life.

One of the album's strongest moments, 'Protective White Light', was inspired by a social media account filled with comments about the halcyon days of rave and club culture. Best's vocals here have a melancholy nostalgia, as if looking back longingly on memorable nights and lost days, his words backed by a euphoric tapestry of beats and hooks. 'Hypersensitive' is another highlight, a seven-minute, high-speed workout with squelchy synths and thudding drums, while 'In Suspended Animation' features a spiralling melody and grubby electric guitar. All these elements frame a frustrated, downbeat, half-spoken narrative that feels like Best trying to come to grips with a technological world that he doesn't fully understand. A winning addition to his impressive catalogue. **MS**

SLOWFOAM
Worlding With Earth
MAPPA

Slovakian label Mappa had a brilliant year in 2023, releasing 10 albums of impeccable mettle, each one chronicling a different perspective of their mantra “liquid cartography, sonic wanderings”. Berlin musician and sound artist Slowfoam appears here with what might be the pick of the bunch. ‘Worlding With Earth’ suffuses contemporary ambient music and ecological sound art with a free-jazz playfulness, and a conceptual paper trail marrying synthesis to Donna Haraway’s ideas of ecofeminism.

Slowfoam’s compositions adeptly balance delicacy and depth. A large part of the building blocks are field recordings, whether raw or scuffed into impressions of shapes that grant a certain physical and tangible nature, while electronic instruments sculpt the banks and bedrock that channel each movement. ‘Playfully Rendered’ has a gentle innocence, with smooth, round edges that feel like summer walks in nature. ‘Soft Montage Of Hypotactic Logic’, meanwhile, has a foggy lull that’s akin to seeking shade from the bright afternoon glare. All in, ‘Worlding With Earth’ is sheer paradise for daydreamers. **FH**

BOOFY & VMO$
BV001LP
SECTOR 7 SOUNDS

We don’t know much about these two shadowy figures from Bristol’s underground scene, but it doesn’t really matter when this captivating, low-key album does the talking for them. Expanding on the sound the pair explored on their seven-inch release for NoCorner in 2016, here Boofy and VMO$ have stitched together an LP comprised of 10 bite-sized tracks.

Amid hazy tape crackle and hiss, nebulous melodies rise up and float into the ether like smoke rings. There are softly smudged beats and snatches of R&B samples that have been chopped up and looped. Moments like ‘U Don’t Know My’ and ‘Will U Ever Kno’ are not much more than the gentle repetition of a one-line vocal set against a languid drum pattern, but they etch themselves pleasingly into your brain like a record needle tracking on dead wax. It’s a brief, lightly sketched outline of an album for quiet home-listening hours, but it leaves a curiously lasting impression. **CF**

MAYA SHENFELD
Under The Sun
THRILL JOCKEY

Jerusalem-born composer Maya Shenfeld recorded her second album at St Matthew’s Church in Berlin, and at a heavily exploited marble quarry in Portugal. If those two locations seem disparate, they are united by the album’s title, taken from a quote in Ecclesiastes that suggests nothing under the sun ever changes. Beneath a Portuguese heatwave presaging impending climate catastrophe, nothing could be further from the truth.

These eight pieces are framed with a modern classical austerity underlined by restless urgency. Tracks like ‘Geist’ and ‘Tehom’ appear sedate and steady on the surface, but Shenfeld’s approach to composition sees her simultaneously fill them with rough edges, atonality, grimy synths and nerve-jarring tension. ‘Interstellar’ begins with a pleasant arpeggio before being overwhelmed by thick, droning organ tendrils, and ‘On Its Rounds The Wind Returns’ combines mournful keyboard notes with field recordings made at the ravaged quarry. A stunning, thought-provoking rumination on our shared existential crisis. **MS**

EPIC45

You'll Only See Us When The Light Has Gone

WAYSIDE & WOODLAND

Resilient post-rock and rural psychedelia

"First thing in the morning, harsh words by the school gate," sighs Ben Holton on 'New Town Faded', the opening track of this elegantly resigned album. "They say, 'I won't let them push me, this country made me'."

Epic45 have always operated in the edgelands. In the 1990s, core members Holton and Rob Glover were school friends in Wheaton Aston, a Staffordshire village within hissing distance of the M6. And their band – formed in 1995 when they were barely teenagers – has lurked ever since in the wilderness separating bucolic idealism from head-throbbing modernity. But where previous recordings have raked over the autumnal embers of childhood memory, this – their 12th studio album – takes a crisply contemporary approach. When those forgotten small towns and weed-covered suburbs are emptied of purpose by political neglect and prospectless ennui, what fills the gaps?

Their conclusions? Misplaced patriotism and tabloid-fuelled bitterness. And yet, with its wistful guitars and open-skied synths, the album is far from polemic. 'Passing' is a breathy swipe at rabble-rousing political poseurs ("You're safe with us under our guiding hand / But just know your place"), while elsewhere the mood is affectingly personal. 'Be Nowhere' urges a downtrodden housewife to seize the chance for escape. "She keeps a silent vigil on a laminated floor / Pink gauntlet to the ceiling for a fallen English town," sings Holton, his heart keening. "When there's nothing left inside and nowhere left to hide / Just be nowhere."

There are laudable attempts to understand the resentment that can seethe through silent streets. "Neighbours start to crack / Plastic flags seen from the fields / Left behind, left to rot by poisoned words from shadows and ghosts". So begins 'The Crush', the album's penultimate lament, driven by a coruscating spiral of acoustic fingerpicking. Joined by drummer Mike Rowley, Holton and Glover have created a sparsely tasteful musical setting for these phlegmatic kitchen sink chronicles. But amid the woozy wobbles of closing track 'Finality', it seems the trio are planning their own escape. "We're leaving home across country / To another place / To another town / We'll stay on the outside and watch life from the inside." On this form, here's hoping for a swift return.

BOB FISCHER

Label Profile

Label: Wayside & Woodland Recordings Ltd
Location: Staffordshire, England
Est: 2007

Potted History: "The roots of the label began with Epic45, a post-rock/dreampop band I started at school with my friend Rob Glover in the late 90s," explains co-founder Ben Holton. "From releasing on various indie labels in the UK and internationally, we became part of the syndicate Make Mine Music. This gave us the introduction to self-releasing, and after a few years, Rob and I got the urge to have a label based on our own aesthetic and ethos and so Wayside & Woodland was born. The first release, in 2008, was a 12-inch vinyl featuring remixes of Epic45 songs by our friends Bibio and Bracken. Before we even released W&W001, though, we made some super-low-run mini CD-Rs. One an edition of four, the other an edition of one!

"The last couple of years have seen huge changes. I left a job in psychiatric healthcare, and Rob and I parted ways in the business, although we've not parted in friendship or with musical collaborations. Now I run the label on my own and can really dedicate my time to it. I've been able to expand on the initial ideas and redefine what Wayside & Woodland means and produces."

Mission Statement: "As with the 'mother project', Epic45, the main drive is a preoccupation with reflecting landscape, place and memory in the music and artwork. Quite often, forgotten, abandoned or even just overlooked places feature heavily. This is very apparent in the Epic45-related projects and is something that's a massive consideration when I work with other folk too. It's important they understand and share this sensibility.

"I like to call it 'edgeland music' and it can cover anything from the strange undercurrents of suburbia, the weird power of the ancient countryside and those areas in between that cause such a stir in my heart."

Key Artists & Releases: "I'm really proud of the Epic45 release, 'We Were Never Here' which featured a 12-inch book of my photography.

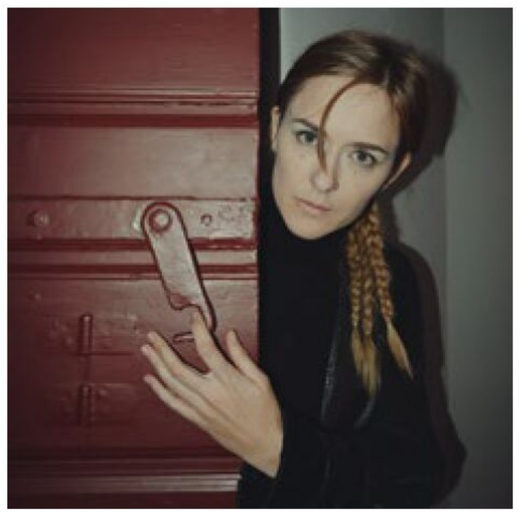
"We've also worked with members of Hood and released work by Mark Van Hoen – Seefeel and Locust – and Richard Youngs. Upcoming for 2024 is the second album by my project The Balloonist, a beautiful album by a US band called Bell Monks, a return to the 'Haunted Woodland' series by Karen Vogt and EPs by my talented friends MENOWTHERETHEN and EL Heath."

Future Plans: "I've moved into the world of photo books and calendars with my Birds In The Brickwork project, but I'd love to publish some word-based books too," says Holton. "More photography and design prints, more collaborations with like-minded people. A Top 10 hit wouldn't hurt, I must say. There doesn't seem to be much call for pop songs about red-brick estates and pylons right now, but maybe my time will come."

Any Other Business? "Have confidence and conviction in the things you believe have meaning. You're often not alone."

For more, visit waysideandwoodlandrecordings.bandcamp.com

First And Last And Always



Swedish composer **Maria W Horn** on the first and last albums she bought, and one she always returns to

FIRST

EBBA GRÖN

Kärlek & Uppror

MISTLUR, 1981

"There was no record shop in the village where I grew up, but one of the stores in the mall had a CD section. I bought Ebba Grön's 'Kärlek & Uppror' there. These are Swedish punk classics. I still love these songs. As my father travelled a lot, working as a sailor on a tanker, I started handing him lists of CDs I wanted, and he brought home piles of cheap bootlegs for me."

LAST

FLOWER TRAVELLIN' BAND

Anywhere

PHILIPS, 1970

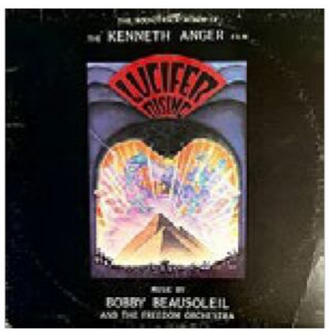
"Someone referred to Flower Travellin' Band as the Japanese equivalent of Black Sabbath, and I think that gives a good clue to their sound. I had been hoping to find this one for a long time when I finally came across it in a bookshop in my own neighbourhood. The cover is one of my all-time favourites. It's so badass."

ALWAYS

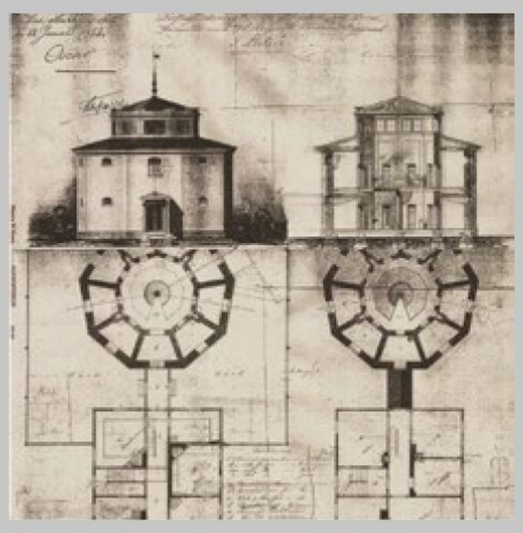
BOBBY BEAUSOLEIL

Lucifer Rising

LETHAL, 1980



"Hard to pick just one! I keep coming back to 'Lucifer Rising' by Bobby Beausoleil, originally composed as a soundtrack to Kenneth Anger's 1972 film. The music is performed by Bobby along with the Freedom Orchestra, all of them inmates of the Tracy Prison. I would describe it as psychedelic desert blues, very eerie and atmospheric."



MARIA W HORN

Panoptikon

XKATEDRAL

Haunting meditations on life behind bars

Maria W Horn originally created the music that comprises 'Panoptikon' for an installation at an abandoned "panopticon" prison in her native Sweden, built in a circular shape to give inmates the impression they were being watched constantly. Once torture and physical punishments were abolished, the prison moved to a kind of extreme social conditioning where convicts were kept in solitary confinement for the first three years of their sentence.

Since her 2018 debut 'Kontrapoetik', Horn's music has been preoccupied with historical investigations. Released on the label she co-runs with Kali Malone, 'Panoptikon' is divided into four pieces, and tries to imagine how the consciousness of those incarcerated would have been affected by such severe social deprivation.

It sounds like a grim and gruesome listen, but while this album certainly has its dark moments, there are also many instances of uplifting beauty, where humanity appears to triumph against such superhuman cruelty.

Take the opening track 'Omnia Citra Mortem', which starts with furtive whispers, distant voices and a single elongated bass noise. Horn took inspiration from a prison diary which told how, on Sundays, inmates would sing hymns together from their individual cells. So she assembled a "ghost choir".

The voices of performers Sara Fors, Sara Parkman, David Åhlen and Vilhelm Bromander begin to harmonise around a triple-pronged phrase representing the different parts of every relentless day. They're eventually matched and are ultimately enveloped by a single, church organ-like chord. It's solemn, sure, but joyous all the same.

Bursting into arpeggiating life, the organ leads us into the second section 'Haec Est Regula Recti', the rich vocal harmonies seeming to act as one. It fades down to the sound of the inmates endlessly listing facts about Sweden to keep their brains from rotting.

The title track is an instrumental affair, occupying more traditional ambient territory with its swooping synth notes and creeping high frequencies. Fragile and melancholy, it's the saddest and most reflective piece of the puzzle. 'Längtans Vita Duva' is the parting shot, with each singer taking their turn in what feels like an ancient, heart-tugging folk song.

'Panoptikon' is certainly demanding, but put yourself in the shoes of its subjects, and you'll find it thoroughly immersive.

BEN WILLMOTT

DUALIST INQUIRY – PHOTO : ANUSHKA MENON

DUALIST INQUIRY
When We Get There
DUALISM

Electronic artists sometimes neglect melody at the expense of concepts, textures and the necessities of the dancefloor. So it's refreshing to come across Sahej Bakshi, aka Dualist Inquiry, as someone who puts a good old tune front and centre. For listeners of a certain vintage, there's something comfortingly familiar about the New Delhi producer's third album – it's almost as if he's reached back through a wormhole to locate the sounds of mid-1990s Britain.

There are head-nodding tempos that take their cue from trip hop, and you find yourself swaying around to the airy 'Days Away' before realising it shares the same chord progression as Womack & Womack's 'Teardrops'. Meanwhile, 'All There Is' makes for a glorious, shuffly UK garage workout, and 'Bloom' is a touching counterpoint that mixes samples of children's voices and sombre piano to create something cinematic and moving. All of these tracks have a wonderful habit of latching their hooks onto memories you weren't even aware you had and getting under your skin. Bakshi is without doubt a formidable talent. **WS**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
Feeling Everything, All At Once
REDSTONE PRESS

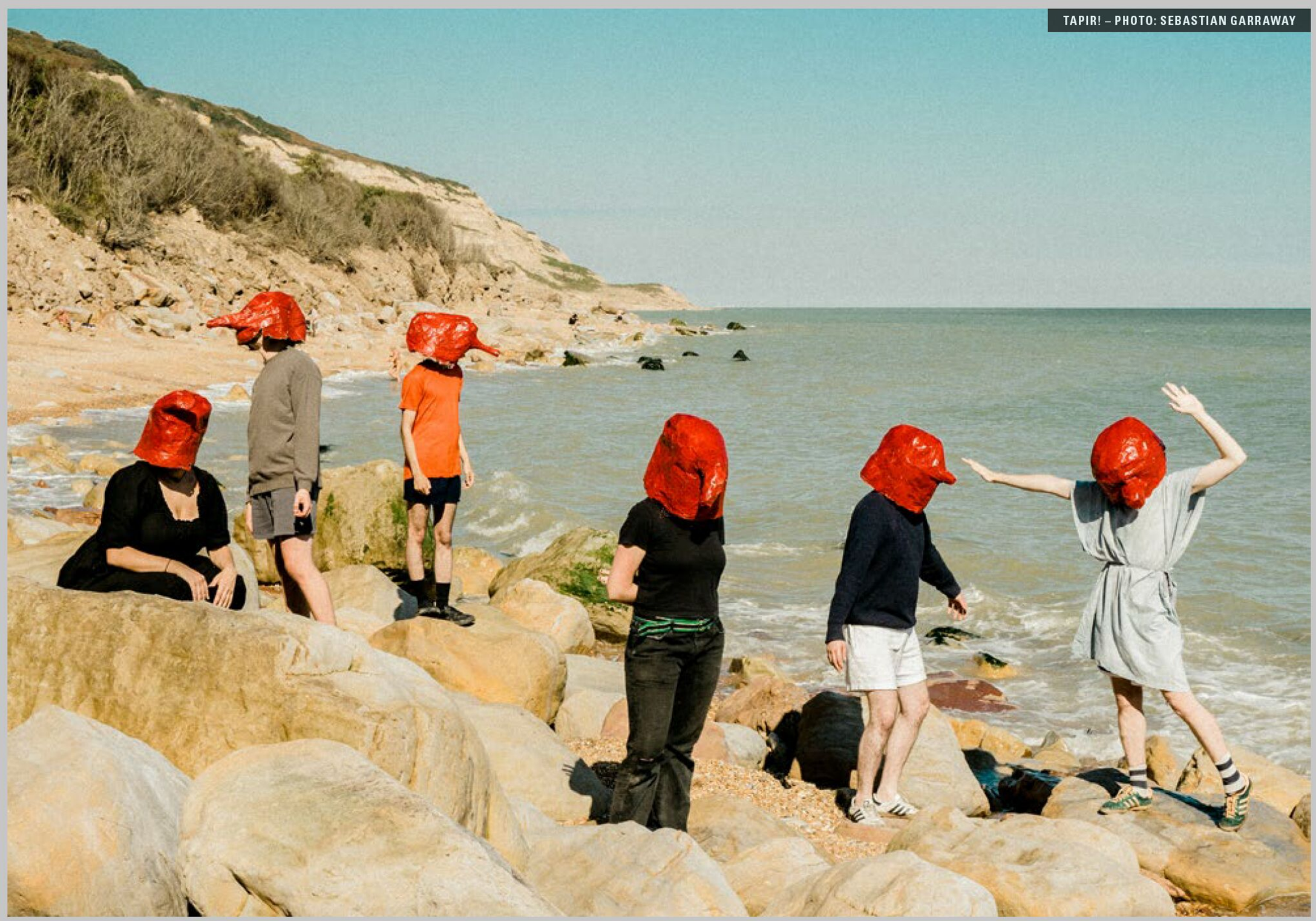
Glasgow label Redstone Press celebrate their 10th release with this collection, featuring 14 tracks from the existing roster and a smattering of "talented debutants" to boot. The label has paired up with the Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH), with proceeds going to the cause. Musically, it's designed to straddle club and home play, a job which it does admirably, as all the acts featured have a grasp of both infectious, original rhythms and vivid, engaging sound design.

Highlights are so plentiful it seems unfair to single them out, but Pelk's juddering, echoing, techno-ish 'Spirit Teaser' is worthy of a mention, as is the brooding, dubby stepper 'Why Not' from Henry Greenleaf, and the Mala-esque garage of 'Take Your Time', which Pseudopolis tops off with bongos, threatening sound system sirens and snippets of MCs in full flow. It's a varied bunch style-wise, but the common factor here is a sense of fearless experimentation, along with universally addictive beats. **BW**

KAREN VOGT
Waterlog
NITE HIVE

'Waterlog' is an album recorded in the brutal, unsettling epicentre of pain. For Karen Vogt, the source of the Australian vocalist and sound artist's grief was the passing of her cat, Luis. She speaks of being weighed down by tears. That idea, of feeling submerged beneath her emotions, gave the album its title.

We hear it at its most pronounced on 'The One That I Love'. The focal point is Vogt's dreamy, melancholy, wordless vocal texture, which often drifts from moments of angst toward something approximating muted euphoria, as if she is alighting on a fleeting happy memory amid the savagery of sad recollection. On this key piece, a violent sonic turbulence rests just behind Vogt's voice, with funereal drones, rapidly crashing waves of stormy feedback and an overwhelming bleakness. 'Weighted', meanwhile, initially finds Vogt's voice unadorned, singing a plaintive song of longing, which is suddenly transformed into an intense squall of processed vocal loops. Altogether, it's a cathartic collection. **MS**



TAPIR! – PHOTO: SEBASTIAN GARRAWAY

TAPIR!

The Pilgrim, Their God And The King Of My Decrepit Mountain

HEAVENLY

"The story of a solitary traveller – known as The Pilgrim – on a journey across a mythical landscape of eerie forests, stormy seas and unholy mountains populated by beasts, injured birds and idealised eidolons". And surely we're *all* here for the idealised eidolons? We're told Tapir! are a London six-piece fronted by singer and guitarist Ike Gray, but let's not bog ourselves down in such dreary mundanity. These are giant papier-mâché head-wearing visionaries on a noble quest across an acid-folk Middle Earth.

Fans of 1970s weirdies like Trees and Comus will find plenty to adore. 'On A Grassy Knoll, We'll Bow Together' sets the tone, Gray's plaintive vocals surrounded by spiralling keyboards and devotional choirs, before 'Swallow' dives headfirst into tangled, trumpet-laden folklore. "He calls my name, the sacred hunter." By the time we reach the Erik Satie-influenced 'Gymnopédie', we're fully immersed in this splendidly wonky world. "I've been told in heaven the rooms are filled with mice / There's breadcrumbs in the bedsheets and Jesus had head lice". Genius. **BF**

ARTO LINDSAY

7 Types Of Ambiguity – A Parade

NO SALAD

In 2022, American musician and no wave pioneer Arto Lindsay created a sound art installation for 'Phantom Power', a research project at Lausanne's University of Art and Design. The result is '7 Types Of Ambiguity – A Parade', in which Lindsay captures and condenses the pulsing sounds of a Brazilian carnival into a small white cube.

So the opening moments of this single, elongated piece might be the festival coming to life – the light clatter and clink of theoretical floats being adjusted, the hubbub drifting through previously quiet spaces. And then the beats build and bulge, punctuated with intermittent swathes of white noise providing a constant reminder of Lindsay's original conceptual conceit.

The music exudes the authentic rhythms of the carnival, but presented in this way, as packets of data which morph and change, it has a kind of otherworldly feel. Recalling The Master Musicians Of Dyffryn Moor's 'Music For Hand-Washing', there's a vibrancy here that borders on anxious urgency, a kind of percussive call to action. **ST**

SEDIBUS

SETI

ORBSCURE

Alex Paterson and Andy Falconer connect us right back to The Orb's 'Ultraworld' era here on their second album as offshoot band Sedibus. SETI is an acronym for Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, which is a real astronomy industry collaboration. This beguilingly melodic, ambient work could easily serve as its working soundtrack.

Many of the tropes that devotees of The Orb would rightly expect from a Paterson/Falconer piece are all reassuringly present. There are the floating classical segments, the mission control-to-astronaut voice samples and the snatches of pseudoscience stoner conspiracy, alongside cavernous textures that emanate from the pair's vast arsenal of vintage analogue gear. But the rich natural elements – gentle strings, pensive piano chords and complex Nyabinghi percussion – that are woven into 'SETI' genuinely set it apart. Our voyage through infinity begins with the Vangelis-nodding opener 'Paradise', while the three-part 'SETI' carries us on a tour de force of electroacoustic composition, taking in cosmic minimalism, grounding folk and nebulous psychedelia. Enjoy the trip. **CG**

XMAL DEUTSCHLAND
Early Singles (1981-1982)
ANJA HUWE
Codes
SACRED BONES

German gothic girl group revival

In 1980, five women from Hamburg picked up instruments and produced a primitive guitar and synth racket with punk abandon. They were Xmal Deutschland and their sound propelled them through the decade, before splitting in 1989. Signed to 4AD for a while, they exemplified the parallel 80s world of fishnet goth glam, where scuzzy Camden venues were filled with girls and boys with huge sculptured hairdos and dramatic make-up, doing snaky hand-dancing in dole queue recreations of ancient regime balls.

Xmal Deutschland, German queens of that scene, were arguably at their absolute best on these first, pre-4AD singles. The rough synth pulse that runs through 'Schwarze Welt' is augmented with shards of guitar and severe vocalising, contrasting with the icy 'Die Wolken' and its drum machine/bass guitar minimalism, while 'Großstadtindianer' has echoes of The Fall's equally roughshod output of the era. They must have been using the same Oxfam keyboard.

Every cut is killer – unrestrained synthpunk from a time when synths and guitars were regularly out-distorting each other, bristling with youthful energy and excitement. For all their dark trappings, these recordings are a life-affirming joy to listen to more than 40 years later.

Reluctant frontwoman Anja Huwe describes herself as "haunted" by Xmal Deutschland's legend, perhaps because she's since forged a successful career as a visual artist. But over 30 years after they split, here she is with her debut solo album. Inevitably, it's a more polished and mature affair than the Xmal material on the companion release, but it retains the same post-punk edge and bleakness. It's inspired by the wartime diary of Moshe Shnitzki, a teenage Russian partisan during the Second World War (of course it is), and all the darkness and intensity that suggests.

Xmal Deutschland guitarist Manuela Rickers is onboard for several tracks too – 'O Wald', which is in the key of epic, the swirling dry ice atmospherics of 'Zwischenwelt' and 'Living In The Forest', a muscular metal motorik workout.

The standouts are the hectic 'Rabenschwarz', which recalls the aforementioned snaky hand-dancing vibes of 1980s goth with its crunchy synth and tribal bashing, and 'Pariah', which has shades of early Killing Joke's messianic appeal. The sweet 'Hideaway' tucks the LP to bed, for what is a welcome return of Anja Huwe's unique creative voice.

MARK ROLAND

KARL BARTOS
The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari
BUREAU B

New sounds for classic Weimar-era cinema

In 2005, Kraftwerk legend Karl Bartos started to consider writing a soundtrack for 'The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari', Robert Wiene's seminal and immeasurably influential 1920 horror movie. It's taken a long time to come to fruition – a sign of Bartos' fastidiousness. The 100th anniversary came and went in 2020, yet he continued to take his time, giving it the respect it undoubtedly deserves.

Bartos is not the first to tackle 'Caligari'. The original orchestral score by Giuseppe Becce is long lost, and in its absence artists like In The Nursery have done their own arrangement. YouTube is full of other composers who've attempted a soundtrack, but it's fair to say that Bartos' score is a little bit special.

Every note aligns reciprocally with each frame – as though they were created in tandem – a pitch-perfect marriage where Bartos judges the balance between Weimar-era modernism and digital modernism (the film itself has been digitally restored by the Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Foundation with Bartos' music as accompaniment). It's so well-balanced, in fact, that you find yourself listening and watching and wondering why he hasn't done this kind of thing before (it's a very different proposition to the 'Tour De France' soundtracks).

He works with deftness and acumen, switching between motifs to denote characters appearing and disappearing, like 'Caligari's Theme', with heightened moments of tension ('Shadows', 'Suspicion', 'A Dark Figure'). The sharp synthesiser sound he utilises obviously wouldn't have been possible back in 1920, but it undoubtedly complements the looming, cartoonish, oblique mise-en-scène.

There's also a sparseness to the music, giving the impression it could be performed by just one person, in the same way that a pianist might have accompanied the film when it was made – a nice touch. Perhaps most enjoyable of all is his angular circus waltz for 'At The Funfair', which backs the visually explosive chiaroscuro carnival scene.

The movie has undoubtedly endured far beyond the wildest expectations of those who made it, and it's reasonable to assume that Karl Bartos' score will be around for a while yet, as people come to discover this old masterpiece anew.

JEREMY ALLEN

REVIEWS BY
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IMOGEN BEBB,
PAUL CLARKE,
BOB FISCHER,
CLAIRE FRANCIS,
CARL GRIFFIN,
FREDDIE HUDSON,
VELIMIR ILIC,
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BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Californian artist **Alvidrez** takes on this month's quick-fire questions

INTERVIEW: CLAIRE FRANCIS
PICTURE: KYLIE SHAFFER

Hello Alvidrez! Where are you right now and what can you see?

"I'm in a dystopian office building, looking at Excel spreadsheets, like the true businessman I am."

We're big fans of 'Antiphon', your debut album. Had you been making music for long, prior to this release?

"I've played piano since I was teeny tiny. I started playing in bands when I was 18 and have never looked back. I really only began making solo music in 2018 – mostly garbage songs on GarageBand with a terribly scratchy mic."

The album explores your evangelical upbringing and subsequent religious renunciation. That sounds like a heavy emotional undertaking

"Absolutely. I was raised in an evangelical church and was fully involved in Sunday school, youth groups and the worship band. I was a firm believer in biblical teachings. The whole thing is based on the tenet that people are depraved and deserve eternal punishment without God, but I just didn't believe that to my core. I really think humans are wonderful and complicated.

"Once I left, my world kind of crumbled beneath me. It suddenly became so much bigger than my previous understanding of it. This album is kind of an ode to the process of finding the beauty in being lost, and being okay with not knowing."

Reckonings with faith seem common in popular music – Depeche Mode's 'Personal Jesus', Aretha Franklin's 'Amazing Grace', Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah'… why do you think that is?

"Well, faith can be a driving force for people. It can be so powerful. It adds purpose and can be a manual for how to be. Having a connection to something outside of yourself along with a community to lean on can be a beautiful thing. There's always the question of 'Am I doing the right thing? What am I doing? Why am I doing this?'. Reconciling your beliefs and your doubt requires so much philosophical upheaval. I don't want to be existential all the time."

One of the most beautiful things about music is the way it brings people together. You found solace in rock bands, right?

"Yes, definitely. I fell in love with the closeness of my music communities. It was always friends making and playing music for each other just for the love of it. It felt the same as going to church. Collective effervescence."

You moved to Glasgow to study creative writing and you've also written a book of poetry. Can you share a few lines of a poem you think we'd like?

"I would like to unpeel. / I would like a drink of heaven. / Not because I am thirsty but because I miss the taste. / What did we do before we discovered heaven? Ate it from the ground?"

Not many people would trade the beaches and sunshine of California for the grey skies of Scotland! What does Glasgow have that California doesn't?

"Trains – no driving. Good 'craic'. Hairstylists that understand curly hair. Best gigs in town at The Old Hairdresser's. I love that I can walk outside my door and run into almost everyone I know here. I love Glasgow, but I do miss the sunshine. I'm the palest I've ever been in my life."

You recorded 'Antiphon' at Glasgow's Green Door Studio. How was that?

"It was brilliant. I worked with Ronan Fay, and he understood the vision and produced the hell out of it. He taught me a lot about producing, which I value so much. He's a whizz and has been such a champion of the album."

Much of the album was written on an "old honky-tonk-sounding piano" that you bought for 20 quid. Does the instrument have a special place in your heart now?

"Oh yes. It reminds me of a piano my grandparents used to have in their living room when I was a kid. It has a weird creepy feeling, possibly because it's tuned half a step down – a nightmare to record with, but I love her. I'm desperately using it now just to re-learn how to play 'Rhapsody In Blue'."

'Be Thou My Vision' feels more electronic and ominous, while 'Hymn For The Corner' sounds like dreamy sacred pop. Is the contrast deliberate?

"I think it just happened that way naturally. 'Be Thou My Vision' is a favourite hymn. I recorded it in a subdued way initially, with the full intention that it would be calming and beautiful. I sent it to my dad, and he said, 'I don't know why it sounds so creepy'. So I said, 'Fine, I'll make it creepier'. I don't think he'll like the new version."

'Hymn For The Corner' came about after a conversation you had with a friend at St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh?

"We sat on a pew, fixated on the sheer height of the stained glass, watched the tourists passing by and lit prayer candles. We grew up in similar religious environments and shared stories about our mutual experiences of loss of community and faith. She's one of the only friends I have that I can wholly and completely relate to in that aspect."

We can hear touches of This Mortal Coil, Cocteau Twins and Cindy Lee. Did you have any other musical reference points?

"Cindy Lee was a big one for me. Also, Grouper, Anna Von Hausswolff, and old hymns sung by massive acapella choirs."

You talk about being inspired by "everyday revelations". Care to expand?

"I think it's just finding a sense of connectedness in the small stuff. It's not an active search for truth, but happening upon it as the day unfolds. The beer cans on the cement. Sitting around a bonfire with friends. The dirt. The look in someone's eye that shows you they love you. I don't know how to explain it without being overly poetic."

What does "holiness" mean to you now?

"I can't bring myself to answer this without sounding woo-woo spiritual. I think I may just plead the fifth…"

'Antiphon' is released by Memorials Of Distinction on 20 February

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